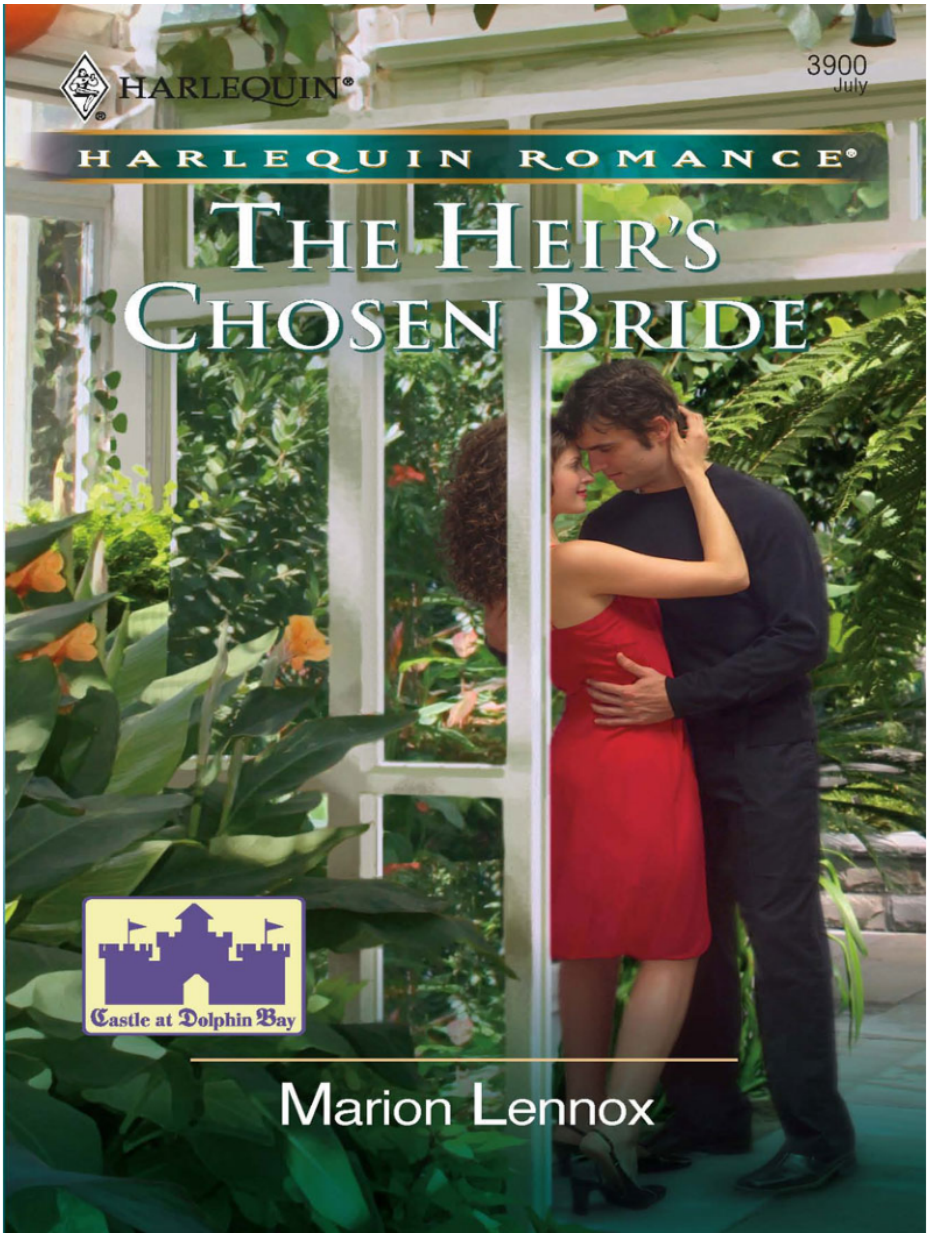
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THE HEIR'S CHOSEN BRIDE
Castle at Dolphin Bay
Marion Lennox

CASTLE AT DOLPHIN BAY

Amidst a struggle for inheritance and a title, love and family triumphâagainst all odds!

Twin sisters

Kirsty McMahon is traveling to Australia with her heavily pregnant, widowed twin, Susie, to help her locate the babyâs great-uncle.

A castle inâ¦Australia!

Angus Douglas is no ordinary uncleâheâs a Scottish earl with a faux-medieval castle and millions in the bank. The adventure has only just begun.

A whole lot of romanceâ¦

Kirsty and Susie are suddenly embroiled in an inheritance battle and a bid to save the castle from destruction, yet amidst all this, the twins each find the one big thing that has been missing from their lives.

***The Doctorâs Proposal* (#3896) was the first book in *Castle at Dolphin Bay* and was published last month.**

Â

Dear Reader,

I love ancient castles, handsome lords in kilts of ancient tartan and bagpipes on the battlements. My Scottish friends, however, tell me a feisty heroine is more likely to be hidden by fog or eaten by midges than she is to find the man of her dreams on yon Scottish parapet.

My Australian climate does have some advantages. Fine, I thought. Iâm a fiction writer. Iâll transfer my Scottish castle to my favorite place in the worldâAustraliaâs New South Wales coast. With a wave of my magic wand, Iâve therefore brought the romance of medieval Scotland to the turquoise waters of todayâs Dolphin Bay. Add a family feud, a fortune to be won, a double set of twins and a couple of very sexy heroesâ¦ Itâs far too much for one book so Iâve spread the fun over two.

My CASTLE AT DOLPHIN BAY duo, starting with *The Doctorâs Proposal,* has every element that good romance requiresâincluding Queen Victoria in the bathroom and a murderer out on the bay. So far itâs two books, but if you enjoy them please let me knowâvia www.marionlennox.com. I may be forced to write another. And another:-)

Happy reading,

Marion Lennox

THE HEIRâS CHOSEN BRIDE

Marion Lennox

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Marion Lennox was born on an Australian dairy farm. She moved onâmostly because the cows werenât interested in her stories! Marion writes for the Medical Romanceâ¢ and Harlequin RomanceÂ® lines. In her non-writing life, Marion cares (haphazardly) for her husband, kids, dogs, cats, chickens and anyone else who lines up at her dinner table. She fights her rampant garden (sheâs losing) and her house dust (sheâs lost!). She also travels, which she finds seriously addictive. As a teenager Marion was told sheâd never get anywhere reading romance. Now romance is the basis of her stories and her stories allow her to travel. If ever there was one advertisement for following your dream, sheâd be it! You can contact Marion at www.marionlennox.com

Books by Marion Lennox

HARLEQUIN ROMANCEÂ®

3832âTHE LAST MINUTE MARRIAGE*
3856âRESCUED BY A MILLIONAIRE
3884âPRINCESS OF CONVENIENCE**
3896âTHE DOCTORâS PROPOSAL***

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CHAPTER ONE

Information required on whereabouts of Dougal Douglas (or direct descendant), brother to Lord Angus Douglas, Earl of Loganaich. Contact solicitors Baird and OâShannasy, Dolphin Bay, Australia, for information to your advantage.

âMr Douglas, youâre an earl.â

Hamish groaned. He was hours behind schedule. The Harrington Trust Committee was arriving in thirty minutes and his perky secretary-in-training was driving him nuts.

âJust sort the mail.â

âBut this letter says youâre an earl. You gotta read it.â

âLike I read e-mails from Nigeria offering to share millions. All I need to do is send my bank account details. Jodie, you know better.â

âOf course I do,â she told him indignantly. Honestly, he was being a twit.

But she forgave him. Who wouldnât? Hamish Douglas was the cutest boss sheâd ever worked for. Jodie had been delighted when Marjorie had retired and sheâd been given the chance to take her place. At thirty-three, Hamish was tall, dark and drop-dead gorgeous. He had ruffled black curls, which fought back when he tried to control them. He had deep brown twinkly eyes and the most fantastic smileâ¦

When he smiled. Which wasnât often. Hamish might be one of the most brilliant young futures brokers in Manhattan, but he didnât seem to enjoy life.

Maybe heâd smile when he realised he really was an earl.

âThis oneâs different,â she told him. âHonest, Mr Douglas, you need to look. If youâre who these people think you are then youâve inherited a significant estate. A significant estate in lawyer speakâ¦I bet that means a fortune.â

âIâve inherited nothing. Itâs a scam.â

âWhatâs a scam? Is Jodie bothering you with nuisance mail?â

Uh-oh. Jodie had been rising, but as soon as the door opened

she sat straight back down. Marcia Vinel was Hamishâs fiancÃ©e. Trouble. Jodie had overheard Marcia on at least two occasions advising Hamish to get rid of her.

âSheâs a temp from the typing pool. Surely you can do better.â

âBut I like her,â Hamish had replied, much to Jodieâs delight. âSheâs smart, intuitive and organisedâand she makes me laugh.â

âYour secretaryâs not here to make you laugh,â Marcia had retorted.

No, Jodie thought, shoving the offending letter into the tray marked PENDING. Lifeâs too serious to laugh. Lifeâs about making money.

âWhatâs the letter?â Marcia said, with a sideways glance at Jodie to say she didnât appreciate Jodie knowing anything about Hamish that she herself didnât. âIs it a scam?â

Jodie knew when to turn into a good secretary. She tugged on her headset, paid attention to her keyboard and didnât answer. âWhatâs the letter?â Marcia said again, this time directly to Hamish.

âItâs some sort of con,â Hamish said wearily. âAnd Jodieâs not bothering me any more than anyone else is. Hell, Marcia, I have work to do.â

âI came to tell you the Harrington delegationâs been delayed,â Marcia told him. âTheir flightâs two hours late from London. Relax.â

He did, but not much. That meant rescheduling andâ¦

âIâll rearrange your appointments.â Jodie emerged from her headset and he cast her a look of gratitude. âOnly I do think you should read the letter.â She mightnât like Marcia, she decided, but at least Marcia would make Hamish look at it.

He went back to frowning. âJodie, get real. Letters saying Iâm an earl and Iâve inherited a fortune are the stuff of a kidâs fantasy.â

âBut it doesnât say send bank account details. It says contact a solicitor. That sounds fusty rather than scammy. Real.â

âLet me see,â Marcia decreed, and put out an imperious hand. Marcia was a corporate lawyer working for the same company as Hamish. She was the brains, he was the money, some people saidâbut Hamish had earned his money with his wits, and there was a fair bit of cross-over.

The two were a team. Jodie handed it over.

There was silence while Marcia read. The letter was on the official notepaper of an Australian legal firm. It looked real, Jodie thought defiantly. She wasnât wasting her bossâs time.

And Marcia didnât think so either. She finished reading and set the letter down with an odd look on her face.

âHamish, do you have an uncle called Angus Douglas? In Australia?â

âNo.â He frowned. âOrâ¦I donât think so.â

âSurely you know your uncles,â Jodie said, and got a frown from Marcia for her pains. She subsided but she didnât replace her headset.

âMy father migrated from Scotland when he was little more than a kid,â Hamish told Marcia. âThere was some sort of family rowâI donât know what. He never told my mother anything about his family and he died when I was three.â

âYou never enquired?â Marcia demanded, astounded, as if such disinterest was inexcusable.

âAbout what?â

âAbout his background. Whether he was wealthy?â

âHe certainly wasnât wealthy. He migrated just after the war when every man and his dog was on the move from Europe. He married my mother and they had nothing.â He hesitated. âAll I knowâ¦â

âAll you know is what?â said Marcia, still staring at the letter.

âWhile I was at college my roommate was doing a history major. I went through some shipping lists he was using, just to see if I could find him. I did. Apparently my father left Glasgow in 1947 on the *Maybelline.* There was no other Douglas on the passenger list so I assumed he was alone.â

âMaybe he had a brother who migrated as well,â Marcia said thoughtfully. âMaybe his brother went to Australia instead. Honey, this letter says someone called Angus Douglas, Earl of Loganaich, died six weeks ago in Australia and theyâre looking for relations of Dougal Douglas. Your father was Dougal, wasnât he?â

Hamishâs face stilled.

âWhat?â Marcia said, and Jodie watched her face change. She knew that look. Sheâd seen it when Marcia was closing on a

corporate deal. The look said she could smell money.

âThere probably arenât that many Dougal Douglases,â Hamish said slowly. âButâ¦my fatherâs address on the shipping manifest was Loganaich. Iâd never heard of the place. I looked it up, and itâs tiny. I thought some day I might go find it, butâ¦â

âBut you got busy,â Marcia said, approving. He certainly had. Hamish had been one of the youngest graduates ever to gain a first-class commerce-law degree from Harvard. After that had come his appointment with one of the most prestigious broking firms in New York, and heâd whizzed up the corporate ladder with the speed of light. At thirty-three, Hamish was a full partner and a millionaire a couple times over. Thereâd been no time in his fast-moving history for a leisurely stroll around Scotland. âHamish, this means you really might have inherited.â

âThis is cool.â Jodie beamed, forgetting her dislike of Marcia as imagination took flight. âThe letter says theyâre not sure whether they have the right person, but it does fit. It says your father was one of three brothers who left Scotland in 1947. The oldest two went to Australia and your dad came here.â

âHe can read it for himself,â Marcia snapped and handed it over to Hamish.

âItâll be a scam.â

âRead it,â Marcia snapped.

And Jodie thought, Whoa, donât do that, lady. If Hamish was my guy I wouldnât talk like that.

But Hamish didnât notice. âItâs probably nothing,â he said at last, but dismissal had made way for uncertainty. âBut with the Loganaich connectionâ¦ Maybe we should check.â

âIâll make enquiries about this law firm,â Marcia said. âIâll get onto it straight away.â

âThereâs no needâ¦â

âThere certainly is,â Jodie breathed. âOh, Mr Douglas, the letter says youâre an earl and youâve inherited a castle and everything. How ace would that be? A Scottish earl. You might get to wear a kilt.â

âNo oneâs seeing my knees,â Hamish said. He grinnedâand then the phone rang and a fax came through that heâd been waiting for and he went back to work.

Castles and titles had to wait.

âThey think theyâve found him.â

Susie Douglas, nÃ©e McMahon, was sitting on a rug before the fire in the great hall of Loganaich-Castle-the-Second, playing with her baby. Rose Douglas was fourteen months old. Sheâd been tumbling with her auntâs dog, Boris, but now baby and dog had settled into a sleepy, snuggly pile, and the women were free to talk.

âThe lawyers have been scouring America,â Susie told her twin. âNow they think theyâve found the new earl. As soon as he comes, Iâ¦I think Iâll go home.â

âBut you canât.â Kirsty stared at her twin with horror. âThis is your home.â

âItâs been great,â Susie said, staring round the fantastically decorated walls with affection. The two suits of armour guarding the hallway were wonderful all by themselves. She talked to them all the time. *Good morning, Eric. Good morning, Ernst.* âBut I canât live here for ever. It doesnât belong to me. I agreed to stay until Angus died, and now he has.â She took a deep breath. âIâve been marking time for too long, Kirsty, love. Eric and Ernst belong to someone else. Itâs time I moved on.â

âYou mustnât.â Yet there was a part of Kirsty that knew Susie was right. This moment had been inevitable.

Susie had come so farâ¦ After the death of her husband, Rory, Susie had fallen apart, suffering from crippling depression as well as the injuries sheâd received in the crash that had killed her husband. In desperation Kirsty had brought her to Australia to meet Roryâs uncle. Lord Angus Douglas, Earl of Loganaich. It had been a grand title for a wonderful old man. In the earl theyâd found a true friend, and in his outlandish castle Susie had recovered. Sheâd given birth to her daughter and sheâd started to look forward again.

To home?

Susieâs home was in America. Her landscaping business was in America. Now Angus was dead there was nothing keeping her here.

But while Susie had been recovering. Kirsty, her twin, had been falling in love with the local doctor. Kirsty and Jake now

had a rambling house on the edge of town, kids, hens, dogâthe whole domestic catastrophe. Kirstyâs home was solidly here.

âI donât want you to go,â Kirsty whispered. âAngus should have left this place to you.â

âHe couldnât.â

âI donât see why not.â

âThis castle was built with entailed money,â Susie explained. âAfter the original Scottish castle burned down, the family trust made money available for rebuilding. Angus managed to arrange it so he rebuilt the castle here in Australia, but he still couldnât leave it away from the true line of the peerage. If Iâd had a son itâd be different, but now it goes to a nephew no one knows. It belongs to a Hamish Douglas. An American.â

She said âan Americanâ in a tone of such disgust that Kirsty burst out laughing. âYou sound as if Americans are some sort of experimental bug,â she said. âJust remember you are one, Susie Douglas.â

âI hardly feel American any more,â Susie said, sighing. Rose rolled sleepily off Boris, and Susie scooped her baby daughter up to hug her. âI have my own little Australian.â

âHalf American, half Scottish, born in Australia. But she belongs here.â

âYou see, Iâm not sure any more,â Susie said, sighing again. âAngus has left me enough to buy a little house and live happily ever after here. But I need to work and thereâs not a lot of landscape gardening to be had in Dolphin Bay.â

âThereâs me,â Kirsty said defensively, and Susie smiled.

âYou know that counts for a lot. But not everything. I need a job, Kirsty. Roryâs been dead for almost two years. My injuries from the crash are almost completely resolved. I loved caring for Angus, but without him the castle seems empty. The only thing keeping me occupied is the upkeep on the castle and the garden, and once the new earl arrivesâ¦â

âWhen is he arriving?â

âI donât know,â Susie told her. âBut the lawyers say theyâve found him and told him heâs inherited. If you were told youâd inherited a title and a fortune, wouldnât you hotfoot it over here?â

Kirsty gave a bleak little smile at that. So much sorrow had

gone into this fortune, this titleâ¦

âI guess I would,â she admitted.

âOnce he arrives thereâs nothing for me to do,â Susie told her, twirling the curls of her almost sleeping daughter.

âMaybe he wonât come,â Kirsty said, trying not to sound desperate. She wanted her sister to stay so much. âOr maybe heâll want you to stay as caretaker.â

âAnd leave it earning nothing? What would you do if you inherited this place?â Susie asked.

âSell it as a hotel,â Kirsty said bluntly, and though she added a grimace it was no less than the truth. Angus had built this place when his castle back in Scotland had burned to the ground. The old manâs whim had led him to rebuild here, in this magic place where the climate was so much kinder than Scotlandâs. But nowâ¦the castle seemed straight out of a fairy tale. It was far too big for a family. Angus had known it could be sold as a hotel, and his intention was surely about to be realised.

âIt feels like a home,â Kirsty added stubbornly, and Susie laughed.

âRight. Fourteen bedrooms, six bathrooms, a banquet hall, a ballroom and me and Rose. Even if you and Jake and the kids and Boris came to live with us, weâd have three bedrooms apiece. Itâs crazy to think of staying.â

âBut you canât go back,â Kirsty said again, and her twinâs face grew solemn.

âI think I must.â

âAt least stay and meet the new earl. Maybe heâll have some ideas rather than selling. Maybe he could employ you to make the garden better.â

âWe both know thatâs a pipe dream.â

âBut you will stay until he gets here. Thatâs what Angus would have wanted.â

âI miss Angus so much,â Susie said softly, and her twin moved across to give her a swift hug.

âOh, love. Of course you do.â

âThe new laird might not even grow pumpkins,â Susie said sadly, and Kirsty had to smile.

âUnforgivable sin!â

âWeâve got the biggest this year,â Susie said, brightening.

âDid I tell you, the night before Angus died I snuck into Ben Boyceâs yard and measured his. Itâs a tiddler in comparison. Angus died knowing he would definitely win this yearâs trophy.â

âThere you go,â Kirsty said stoutly. âThe new earl just has to collect his pumpkin and take over where Angus left off.â

âThe lawyers say heâs some sort of financier. An American financier valuing a prize pumpkinâ¦you have to be kidding.â

âIâm not kidding,â Kirsty said. âYouâll see. Heâll come and heâll fall for the place and want a caretaker and landscape gardener extraordinaire, and pumpkin pie for dinner for the rest of his life.â

âHe wonât.â

âAt least wait and see,â Kirsty begged. âPlease, Susie. You must give him a chance.â

Â

âHoliday?â Hamish glared at his secretary in stupefaction. âYou are joking.â

âIâm not joking. Your holiday starts next weekâsir. Oh, by the way, Iâm quitting.â

âYouâre not making sense.â Hamish was late for a meeting. Heâd been gathering his notes when his unconventional secretary had burst in to tell him her news.

âYouâre having three weeksâ holiday starting next week,â Jodie repeated patiently. âAnd Iâm quitting.â

He gazed at her as heâd gaze at someone with two heads.

âYou canât quit,â he said weakly, and she grinned.

âYes, I can. Iâm only a temp. I came here two years ago on a two-week agency placing, and no oneâs given me a contract.â

âBut people donât just leaveââ

âWell, why would they when the moneyâs brilliant?â Jodie acknowledged. âBut have you noticed that people *do* leave this firm? They start taking time off because they canât cope. Theyâre constantly tired. They forget things. They stop being efficient and then theyâre bumped. So all Iâm doing is leaving before Iâm bumped. Why do you think Marjorie retired so young? Listening to you and the girlfriend made me thinkâ¦â

âMe and Marcia?â

âYou and Marcia. Sheâs as pleased as could be about your

new titleâshe canât wait to get married so sheâll be Lady Marcia Douglasâbut as for agreeing you donât have time to go see a castleâ¦â

âItâs a fake castle,â he said faintly.

âA castle is a castle and it sounds cool,â Jodie declared. âJust because itâs not six hundred years old doesnât mean itâs not a real one. And Marciaâs idea of putting it on the market without seeing it is ridiculous. Anyway, I was talking to Nick, and he saidââ

âNick?â

âMy partner,â she said with exaggerated patience. âThe man I share my life with. Heâs a woodworker. He was a social worker with disadvantaged kids, but the work just wore him out. He loved it but it exhausted him. Heâs almost as cute as you, and I talk about him all the time. Not that you listen.â

Hamish blinked. He hesitated and glanced at his watch. Then he carefully laid his papers on the desk in front of him. Jodie was a great, if unconventional, secretary, and itâd be more efficient to spend a few minutes now persuading her to stay rather than training someone newâ

âDonât do this to me,â Jodie begged. âYouâre scheduling me into your morning and I donât intend to be scheduled. Iâm working on changing your life here. Not the next half-hour.â

âPardon?â

âYou see nothing but work,â she told him. âThe typing-pool gossip is that youâve been blighted in love. That explains Marcia but itâs none of my business. All I know is that youâre blinkered. Youâve been given the most fantastic opportunity and youâre throwing it away.â

Hamish sat down. âThis isââ

âImpertinent,â she told him, and beamed. âI know. But someone needs to tell you. Nickâs been given a contract to rebuild the choir stalls at a gorgeous old church up in New England. Weâre both going to move. Thatâs why I need to quit. So then I thought if I was quitting I should try to save you first. Nick agrees. Spending your whole life making money is awful. Owning a castle and not visiting it before you sell it is madness. So Iâve cancelled every one of your appointments for the next three weeks, starting the minute youâve finished with the

Harrington committee. I havenât just crossed them out of your diary but Iâve contacted everyone and rescheduled. Jobâs done. As of next week Iâm out of here, and if you have the brains I credit you with, so will you be.â

âI canât.â

âYes, you can,â she told him. âYour Lordship.â

âJodieâ¦â

âYes?â She was beaming, as if sheâd just played Santa Claus. âIâve booked flights for you. From JFK to Sydney, and thereâs a hire car waiting so you can drive straight down to Dolphin Bay. If you want to take Marcia theyâre holding two seats, but I told them youâd probably cancel one.â

âMarcia wonât come.â

âNo, but you will,â she told him. âYouâve been in this job for nearly ten years, and no one can remember you taking a holiday. Oh, sure, youâve been away but itâs always been on some financial wheeler dealer arrangement. Dealing with Swiss bankers with a little skiing on the side. A week on a corporate yacht with financiers and oilmen. Not a sniff of time spent lying on the beach doing nothing. Isnât it about time you had a look at life before you marry Marcia andâ¦?â She paused and bit back what sheâd been about to say. âAnd settle down?â

âI canât,â he said again, but suddenly he wasnât so sure.

âIâve cleared it with all the partners. Everyone knows youâre going and they know why. Youâve inherited a castle. Everyoneâs asking for postcards. So youâre going to look pretty dumb sitting round this office for the next three weeks doing nothing. Or telling everyone that Iâve lied about you needing a holiday and youâre not taking one, yah, boo, sucks.â

âPardon?â he said again, and her grin widened.

âThatâs not stockbroker talk,â she told him. âItâs street talk. Real talk. Which Iâve figured you need. If youâre going to go from share-broking to aristocracy maybe you need a small wedge of real life in between.â

Â

âLook, you dumb worm, if you donât get out of there youâll be concrete.â

Susieâs hair was escaping from her elastic band and drifting

into her eyes. She flipped it back with the back of her hand, and a trickle of muddy water slid down her face. Excellent.

This was her very favourite occupation. Digging in mud. Susie was making a path from the kitchen door to the conservatory. The gravel path had sunk and she needed to pour concrete before she laid pavers, but first she had to dig. Sheâd soaked the soil to make it soft, and it was now oozing satisfactorily between her fingers as she rescued worms. Rose was sleeping soundly just through the window. The sun was shining on her face and she was feeling great.

She needed to get these worms out of the mud or theyâd be cactus.

âIâm just taking you to the compost,â she told them, in her best worm-reassuring tone. âThe compost is worm heaven. Ooh, youâre a nice fat oneâ¦â

A hand landed on her shoulder.

She was wearing headphones and had heard nothing. She yelped, hauled her headphones off, staggered to her feet and backed away. Fast.

A stranger was watching her with an expression of bemusement.

He might be bemused but so was she. The stranger looked like heâd just strolled off the deck of a cruising yacht. An expensive yacht. He was elegantly casual, wearing cream chinos and a white polo top with a discreet logo on the breast. He was too far away now to tell what the logo was, but she bet it was some expensive country club. A fawn loafer jacket slung elegantly over one shoulder.

He was wearing cream suede shoes.

Cream shoes. Here.

She looked past the clothes with an effortâand there was surely something to see beside the clothes. The stranger was tall, lean and athletic. Deep black hair. Good skin, good smileâ¦

Great smile.

Sheâd left the outer gate open. There was a small black sedan parked in the forecourt, with a hire-car company insignia on the side. Sheâd been so intent on her worms that heâd crept up on her unawares.

He could have been an axe murderer, she thought, a little bit

breathless. She should have locked the gate.

Butâ¦maybe she was expecting him? This had to be who she thought he was. The new earl.

Maybe she should have organised some sort of guard of honour. A twelve-gun salute.

âYouâre the gardener?â he asked, and she tried to wipe mud away with more mud as she smiled back. She was all the welcome committee there was, so she ought to try her best.

A spade salute?

âI am the gardener,â she agreed. âPlus the rest. General dogsbody and bottle-washer for Loganaich Castle. What can I do for you?â

But his gaze had been caught. Solidly distracted. He was staring at a huge golden ball to the side of the garden. A vast ball of bright orange, about two yards wide.

âWhat is that?â he said faintly.

She beamed. âA pumpkin. Her nameâs Priscilla. Isnât she the best?â

âI donât believe it.â

âYouâd better. Sheâs a Dills Atlantic Giant. We decided on replacing Queensland Blues this yearâwe spent ages on the Internet finding the really huge suckersâand went for Dills instead. Of course, theyâre not quite as good to eat. Actually, theyâre cattle feed, but whoâs worrying?â

âNot me,â he said faintly.

âThe only problem is we need a team of bodybuilders to move her. Our main competitor has moved to Dills as well, but he doesnât have the expertise. Weâll walk away with the award for Dolphin Bayâs biggest pumpkin this year, no worries.â

âNo worries,â he repeated, dazed.

âThatâs Australian for âno problemâ,â she explained kindly. âOr you could say, âSheâll be right, mate.ââ

This conversation was going nowhere. He tried to get a grip. âIs anyone home? In there?â He waved vaguely in the direction of the castle.

âIâm home. Me and Rose.â

âRose?â

âMy daughter. Are youââ

âIâm Hamish Douglas. Iâm looking for a Susie Douglas.â

âOh.â

He really was the new earl.

There was a momentâs charged silence. She wasnât what heâd expected, she thought, but, then, he wasnât what sheâd expected either.

Sheâd thought heâd look like Rory.

He didnât look like any of the Douglases sheâd met, she decided. He was leaner, finer boned, finerâ¦tuned? He was a Porsche compared to Roryâs Land Rover, she decided, limping across to greet him properly. She still had residual stiffness from the accident in which Rory had been killed, and it was worse when sheâd been kneeling.

But the pain was nothing to what it had been, and she smiled as she held out her hand in greeting. Then, as she looked at his face and realised there was a problem, her smile broadened. She wiped her hands on the seat of her overalls and tried again.

âSusie Douglas would be me,â she told him, gripping his reluctant hand and shaking. âHi.â

âHi,â he said, and looked at his hand.

âItâs almost clean,â she told him, letting a trace of indignation enter her voice as she realised what he was looking at. âAnd itâs good, clean dirt. Only a trace wormy.â

âWormy?â

âEarthworms,â she said, exasperated. This wasnât looking good in terms of long-term relationship. In terms of long-term caring for this garden. âWorms that make pumpkins grow as big as Priscilla here. Not the kind that go straight to your liver and grow till they come out your eyeballs.â

âUmâ¦fine.â He was starting to sound confounded.

âIâm transferring them to the compost,â she told him, deciding sheâd best be patient. âIâm laying concrete pavers to the conservatory, and how awful would it be to be an earthworm encased in concrete? Do you want to see the conservatory?â

âUmâ¦sure.â

âI might as well show you while weâre out here,â she told him. âYouâve inherited all this pile, and the conservatoryâs brilliant. It was falling into disrepair when I arrived, but Iâve built it up. Itâs almost like the old orangeries they have in grand English houses.â

âYouâre American,â he said on a note of discovery. âBut youâreâ¦â

âIâm the castle relic,â she told him. âHang on a minute. I need to check something.â

She limped across to the closest window, hoisted herself up and peered through to where Rose snoozed in her cot.

âNope. Still fine.â

âWhatâs fine?â he asked, more and more bemused.

âRose. My daughter.â She gestured to the headphones now lying abandoned in the mud. âYou thought I was listening to hip-hop while I worked? I was listening to the sounds of my daughter sleeping. Much more reassuring.â She turning and starting to walk toward the conservatory. âRelics are what they used to call us in the old days,â she said over her shoulder. âTheyâre the women left behind when their lords died.â

âAnd your lord wasâ¦â

âRory,â she told him. âYour cousin. He was Scottish-Australian but he met me in the States.â

âI donât know anything about my cousins.â She was limping toward a glass-panelled building on the north side of the house, moving so fast he had to lengthen his stride to keep up with her.

âYou donât know anything about the family?â

âI didnât know anyone existed until I got the lawyerâs letter.â

âSaying you were an earl.â She chuckled. âHow cool. Itâs like Cinderella. You should have been destitute, living in a garret.â She glanced over her shoulder, eyeing him appraisingly. âBut they tell me youâre some sort of financier in Manhattan. I guess you werenât in any garret.â

âIt was a pretty upmarket garret,â he admitted. They reached the conservatory doors, and she swung them wide so he could appreciate the vista. âWow!â

âIt is wow,â she said, approving.

It certainly was. The conservatory was as big as three or four huge living rooms and it was almost thirty feet high. It looked almost a cathedral, he thought, dazed. The beams were vast and blackened with glass panels set between. Hundreds of glass panels.

âThe beams came from St Maryâs Cathedral just south of Sydney,â Susie told him. âSt Maryâs burned down just after the war when Angus was building this place. He couldnât resist. He had all the usable timbers trucked here. For the last few years he

didnât have enough energy to keep it up, but since Iâve been here Iâve been restoring it. I love it.â

He knew she did. He could hear it in her voice.

She didnât look like any relic heâd met before.

Susie was wearing menâs overalls, liberally dirt-stained. She was shortish, slim, with an open, friendly face. She had clear, brown enquiring eyes, and her auburn curls were caught back in a ponytail that threatened to unravel at any minute. A long white scar ran across her foreheadâhardly noticeable except that it accentuated the lines of strain around her eyes. She was still young but her face had seenâ¦life?

Her husband had been murdered, he remembered. Thatâs what the lawyers had told him. Back in New York it had seemed a fantastic tale but suddenly it was real. Bleakly real.

âDo you know about the family?â she asked, as if sheâd guessed his thoughts and knew he needed an explanation.

âVery little,â he told her. âIâd like to hear more. Angus was the last earl. He died childless. Your husband, Rory, was his eldest nephew, and he and the second nephew, Kenneth, are both dead. Iâm the youngest nephew. I never knew Angus, I certainly didnât know about the title, and Iâm still trying to figure things out. Am I right so far?â

âPretty much.â

âAngus and my father and another brotherâRory and Kennethâs fatherâleft Scotland just after the war?â

âApparently the family castle was a dark and gloomy pile on the west coast of Scotland,â she told him. âThe castle was hit by an incendiary bomb during the war and it burned to the ground. As far as I can gather, no one grieved very much. The boys had been brought up in an atmosphere that was almost poisonous. Angus inherited everything, the others nothing, and the estate was entailed in such a way that he couldnât do anything about it. After the fire they decided to leave. Angus said your father was the first to go. He boarded a boat to America and Angus never heard from him again.â

âAnd Angus andâ¦what was the other brother calledâDavid?â

âAngus was in the air force and he was injured toward the end of the war. While he was recuperating he met Deirdre. She was a nurse and her family had been killed in the London Blitz,

so when he was discharged they decided to make their home in Australia. David followed.â She hesitated. âThe relationship was hard, and the resentment followed through to the sons.â

âI donât understand.â

âA situation where the eldest son gets everything and others get nothing is asking for trouble.â She walked forward and lifted a ripening cumquat into her hands. She touched it gently and then let it go again, releasing it so it swung on its branch like a beautiful mobile. There were hundreds of cumquats, Hamish thought, still dazzled by the beauty of the place.

Did one eat cumquats? Heâd only ever seen them as decorator items in the foyers of five-star hotels.

âAngus rebuilt his castle here,â she said. âIt was a mad thing to do, but it gave the men of this town a job when things were desperate. Maybe it wasnât as crazy as it sounds. He and Deirdre didnât have children but David had two. Rory and Kenneth. I married Rory.â

âThey told me that Kenneth murdered Rory,â he said flatly. It had to be talked about, he decided, so why not now?

She pushed her cumquat so it swung again and something in her face tightened, but she didnât falter from answering. âThere was such hate,â she said softly. âAngus said his brothers hated him from the start, and Kenneth obviously felt the same about Rory. Rory travelled to the States to get away from it. He met me and he didnât even tell me about the family fortune. But, of course, it was still entailed. Rory was still going to inherit and Kenneth wanted it. Enoughâ¦enough to kill. Then, when he wasâ¦found outâ¦he killed himself.â

âWhich is where I come in,â he said softly, trying to deflect the anguish she couldnât disguise.

She took a deep breath. âWhich is where you come in,â she said and turned to face him. âWelcome to Loganaich Castle, my lord,â she said simply. âI hope youâll deal with your inheritance with Angusâs dignity. And I hope the hate stops now.â

âI hope youâll help me.â

âIâm going home,â she told him. âIâve had enough ofâ¦of whatever is here. Itâs your inheritance. Rory and Angus have left me enough money to keep me more than comfortable. Iâm leaving you to it.â

CHAPTER TWO

THIS was where he took over, Hamish thought. This was where he said, *Thank you very much, can I have the keys?*

The whole thing was preposterous. He should never have let Jodie insinuate her crazy ideas into his mind.

The thought of being left alone with his very own castle was almost scary.

âLetâs not do anything hasty,â he told Susie. âIâll get a bed for the night in town, and weâll sit down and work things out in the morning.â

âYouâre not staying here?â she asked, startled.

âThis has been your home,â he said. âIâm not kicking you out.â

âWe do have fourteen bedrooms.â

He hesitated. âHow do you know Iâm not like Kenneth?â

She met his gaze and held. âYouâre not like Kenneth. I can see.â She bit her lip and turned back to concentrate on her cumquat. âBitterness leaves its mark.â

âItâs not fair that I inheritââ

âAngus and Rory between them left me all I need, thank you very much,â she said, and there was now a trace of anger in her voice. âNo one owes me anything. Iâm not due for anything, and I donât care about fairness or unfairness in terms of inheritance. Thinking like that has to stop. I have a profession and Iâll return to it. To kill for moneyâ¦â

âBut if your baby had been a boy he would have inherited,â he said softly. âItâs unjust.â

âYou think that bothers me?â

âIâm sure it doesnât.â

âFine,â she said flatly. âSo thatâs settled. You neednât worry. The escutcheon is firmly fixed in the male line, so thereâs no point in me stabbing you in the middle of the night or putting arsenic in your porridge.â

âToast,â he said. âI donât eat porridge.â

She blinked. This conversation was crazy.

But maybe that was the way to go. Sheâd had enough of being serious. âYou donât eat porridge?â she demanded, mock horrified. âWhat sort of a laird are you?â

âIâm not a laird.â

âOh, yes, you are,â she said, starting to smile. âOr you probably are. Fancy clothes or not, you have definite laird potential.â

âI thought I was an earl?â

âYouâre that, too,â she told him. âAnd of course youâll stay that as long as you live. But being laird is a much bigger responsibility.â

âI donât even know what a laird is.â

âThe termâs not used so much any more,â she said. âIt means a landed proprietor. But itâs more than that. Itâs one who holds the dignity of an estate. Angus was absolutely a laird. Iâm not sure what sort of laird Rory would have made. Kenneth would never have been one. But you, Hamish Douglas? Will you make a laird?â

âThat sounds like a challenge,â he said, and she jutted her chin a little and met his look head on.

âMaybe it is.â

He hesitated, not sure where to take this. Not at all sure that she wasnât just a little crazy herself. âMaybe Iâd best stay in town,â he said. âIâll come back in the morning to organise things.â

âThereâs not much to organise,â she told him. âBut you need to stay here. Thereâs only the Black Stump pub, and Thursday is darts night. Thereâs no sleep to be had in the Black Stump before three in the morning. Anyway, if anyone moves out it should be me. Itâs your home now. Not mine.â

âBut you will stay,â he said urgently. âI need to learn about the place.â

âWhat do you intend to do with it?â

There was only one answer to that. âSell.â

Her face stilled. âCan you do that?â

âIâve checked.â Actually, Marcia had checked. âIf I put the money into trust, then, yes.â The capital needed to stay intact but the interest aloneâplus the rent rolls from the land in

Scotlandâwould keep him wealthy even without his own money.

âYou donât need me to help you sell it,â she snapped, and then bit her lip. âIâm sorry. I know selling seems sensible butâ¦butâ¦â

She took a deep breath, and suddenly her voice was laced with emotionâand pain. âIâll stay tonight. Tomorrow Iâll pack and go stay with my sister until I can arrange a flight home.â

âSusie, thereâs no needââ

âThere is a need,â she said, and suddenly her voice sounded almost desperate.

âBut why?â

âBecause I keep falling in love,â she snapped, the desperation intensifying. âI fell so far into love with Rory that his death broke my heart. I fell for Angus. And now Iâve fallen for your stupid castle, for your dumb suits of armourâtheyâre called Eric and Ernst, by the way, and they like people chatting to themâfor your stupid compost system, which is second to none in the entire history of the western worldâIâve even fallen for your worms. I keep breaking my heart and Iâm not going to do it any more. Iâm going home to the States and Iâm going back to landscape gardening and Rose and I are going to live happily ever after. Now, if youâll excuse me, I need to finish my work. Bring your gear in. You can have any bedroom you like upstairs. The whole top floor is yours. Rose and I are downstairs. But I need to do some fast digging before Rose wakes from her nap. Dinnerâs at seven and thereâs plenty to spare. Iâll see you in the kitchen.â

And without another word she brushed past him, out of the conservatory and back into the brilliant autumn sunshine. She grabbed her spade sheâd left leaning against the fence and headed off the way theyâd come. Her back was stiff and setâher spade was over her shoulder like a soldier carrying a gunâshe looked the picture of determination.

But he wasnât fooled.

Heâd seen the glimmer of unshed tears as sheâd turned awayâand as she reached the garden gate she started, stiffly, to run.

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âKirsty, heâs here. The new owner.â

Susie had been crying. Kirsty could hear it in her voice, and her heart stilled.

âSweetheart, is he horrid? Is he another Kenneth? Iâll be right there.â

âI donât need you to come.â There was an audible sniff.

âThen whatâs wrong?â

âHeâs going to sell.â

Susieâs sister paused. Sheâd known this would happen. It was inevitable. But somehowâ¦somehow sheâd hopedâ¦

Susie had come so far. Dreadfully injured in the engineered car crash which had killed her husband, Susie had drifted into a depression so deep it had been almost crippling. But with this place, with her love for the old earl, with her love for the wonderful castle garden and her enchantment with her baby daughter, sheâd been hauled back from the brink. For the last few months sheâd been back to the old Susie, laughing, bossy, full of plansâ¦

Angusâs death had been expected, a peaceful end to a long and happy life, but Kirsty knew that her twin hadnât accepted it yet. Hadnât moved on.

Kirsty was a doctor, and sheâd seen this before. Loving and caring for someone to the end, watching them fade but never really coming to terms with the reality that the end meant the end.

âSoâ¦â she said at last, cautiously, and Susie hiccuped back a sob.

âIâm going home. Back to the States. Tomorrow.â

âUmâ¦ I suspect you wonât be able to get travel papers for Rose by tomorrow.â

âI have a passport for her already. There are only a couple of last-minute documents I need to organise. Can I come and stay with you and Jake until then?â

âSure,â Kirsty said uneasily, mentally organising her house to accommodate guests. They were extending the back of the house to make a bigger bedroom for the twinsâand for the new little one she hadnât quite got round to telling her sister aboutâbut theyâd squash in somehow. âBut why? Whatâs he like?â

âHeâs gorgeous.â

Silence.

âIâ¦see.â Kirsty turned thoughtful. âSo why do you want to come and stay at our house? Donât you trust yourself?â

âItâs not like that.â

âNo?â

âNo,â Susie snapped. âItâs justâ¦ Heâs not like Rory and heâs not like Angus and I canât bear him to be here. Justâowning everything. He doesnât even know about compost. I said we had the best compost system in the world and he looked at me like I was talking Swahili.â

âNormal, in fact.â

âHeâs not normal. He wears cream suede shoes.â

âRight.â

âDonât laugh at me, Kirsty Cameron.â

âWhen have I ever laughed at you?â

âAll the time. Can I come and stay?â

âNot tonight. Tomorrow Iâll air one of the new rooms and see if I can get the paint fumes out. You can surely bear to stay with him one night. Orâ¦would you like me to come and stay with you?â

âNo. I meanâ¦well, he offered to stay at the pub so he must be safe enough. I said he could stay.â

âWould you like to borrow Boris?â

âFat lot of good Boris would be as a guard dog.â

âHeâs looked after us before,â Kirsty said with dignity. OK, Boris was a lanky, misbred, over-boisterous dog, but heâd proved a godsend in the past.

Faint laughter returned to her sisterâs voice at that. âHe did. Heâs wonderful. But Iâm fine. Iâll feed Lord Hamish Douglas and give him a bed tonight and then Iâll leave him to his own devices.â The smile died from her words. âOh, but, Kirsty, to see him sell the castleâ¦I donât see how I can bear it.â

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The castle was stunning.

While Susie finished her gardening Hamish took the opportunity to explore. And he was stunned.

It was an amazing, over-the-top mixture of grandeur and kitsch. The old earl hadnât stinted when it came to building a castle as a castle ought to be builtâto last five hundred years or

more. But into his grand building heâd put furnishings that were anything but grand. Hamish had an Aunt Molly whoâd love this stuff. He thought of Molly as he winced at the truly horrible plastic chandeliers hung along the passageways, at the plastic plants in plastic urns, at the cheap gilt Louis XIV tables and chairs, and at the settees with bright gold crocodile legs. It was so awful it was brilliant.

Then he opened the bathroom door and Queen Victoria gazed down at him in blatant disapproval from behind an aspidistra. He burst out laughing but he closed the door fast. A man couldnât do what a man had to do under that gaze. Heâd have to find another bathroom or head to the pub.

More exploring.

He found another bathroom, this one fitted with a chandelier so large it almost edged out the door. The portrait here was of Henry the Eighth. OK. He could live with Henry. He found five empty bedrooms and chose one with a vast four-poster bed and a view of the ocean that took his breath away.

He decided staying here was possible.

Susie was still digging in the garden below. He watched her for a minuteâand went back to thinking. Staying here was fraught with difficulties.

What had she said? Sheâd fallen in love with a castle, a compost bin, the worms she was digging out of the mud right now.

Sheâd cried.

The set look of her shoulders said she might still be crying.

He didnât do tears.

The smile heâd had on his face since heâd met Queen Victoria faded. He put Susieâs emotion carefully away from him.

He sorted his gear, hanging shirts neatly, jackets neatly, lining up shoes. He had enough clothes to last him a week. Otherwise heâd have to find a laundry.

Marcia called him a control freak. Marcia was right.

Almost involuntarily, he crossed to the window again. Susie was digging with almost ferocious intensity, taking out her pain on the mud. He saw her pause and wipe her overalled arm across her eyes.

She was crying.

He should stay at the pub. Darts or not.

That was dumb. Fleeing emotion? What sort of laird did that make him?

He owned this pile. He was Lord Hamish Douglas. Ridiculous! If his mother knew what was happening sheâd cry, too, he thought, and then winced.

Too many tears!

For the first part of his life tears had been all heâd known. When heâd been three his father had suicided. That was his first memory. Too many women, too many tears, endless sobbingâ¦

The tears hadnât stopped. His mother had held her husbandâs death to her heartâover his headâfor the rest of her life. She held it still.

Her voice came back to him in all its pathos.

âWash your knees, Hamish. Your father would hate it if he saw his son with grubby knees. Oh, I canât bear it that he canât be here to see.â

Tears.

âDo your homework, Hamish. Oh, if you failâ¦â

Tears.

Or, as heâd shown no signs of failing, âYour father would be so proudâ¦â And the sobbing would continue. Endlessly. His mother, her friends, his aunts.

Thereâd been tears every day of his life until heâd broken away, fiercely, among floods of recriminationsâand more tearsâand made his own life. Heâd taken a job in Manhattan, far away from his Californian home. Far from the tears.

He hated the cryingâthe endless emotion. Hated it! His job now was an oasis of calm, where emotions were the last thing he needed. Marcia was cool, calm and self-contained. Nary a tear. That was his life.

He shouldnât have come, he thought. This title thing was ridiculous. Heâd never use it. Marcia thought it was great and if she wanted to use the âLadyâ bit then that was fine by him.

Marcia would never cry.

Heâd call her, he decided, retrieving his cell phone. Manhattan was sixteen hours behind here. Four in the afternoon here made it midnight back home. Marcia would be in bed, reading the long-winded legal briefs she read as avidly as some read crime novels.

She answered on the first ring. âHamish. Fabulous. Youâre

there, then. Should I address you as Lord Douglas?â

âCut it out, Marcia,â he said uncomfortably, and she backed off in an instant. That was the great thing about Marcia. She never intruded on his personal space.

âIâm sorry. Did you have a good journey?â

âFine, thank you.â

There was a momentâs pause. Marcia was expecting him to say something else, he knew, but he was still watching Susie under his window. Susie was digging as if her life depended on it.

âWhatâs it like?â Marcia said eventually, all patience. âThe castle?â

âCrazy. Queen Victoriaâs in my bathroom.â

âWho?â

âQueen Vic. Itâs OK. Iâve changed to one with Henry the Eighth.â

âWhat are you talking about?â

âPortraits in the bathroom. The place is full of kitsch. Queen Victoria is a trifleâ¦distracting.â

âOh.â She sounded annoyed. âFor heavenâs sake, Hamish, just take it down.â

Thatâd be sensible, he thought. Heâd take all the portraits down. Heâd send them to his Aunty Molly. As soon as Susie left.

âWas there anyone there to meet you?â

âRory Douglasâs widow. The lawyer told us about Rory Douglas.â

âHe did,â she said, and he could hear her leafing through documents till she found what she wanted. âIâve got the letter here. He was murdered by his brother, which is why you inherited. Whatâs she like?â

âEmotional.â

âA lachrymose widow,â she said with instant sympathy. âMy poor Hamish, how awful. Will she be hard to move?â

âWhat do you mean?â

âIf sheâs been living thereâ¦sheâs not a tenant for life or anything, is she? You can still sell?â

âShe offered to move out tonight.â

âThatâs great!â

âI can hardly kick her out tonight,â he said and heard her

regroup.

âWell, of course not. Will you need to use some of the inheritance to resettle her, do you think? Does she have somewhere to go?â

âSheâs American. Sheâs coming home.â

âNot entirely silly, then,â Marcia said with approval. âShe has plans. What about you? How long do you think itâll take to put the place on the market?â

âIâll paint a âFor Saleâ sign on the gate tomorrow.â

âBe serious,â she told him. âHamish, this is a lot of money. If the place is full of kitsch youâd best clean it out so it doesnât put potential buyers off. Will it sell as a potential hotel?â

That much he knew. âYes.â

âThen there are specialist realtors. International hotel dealers. Iâll get back to you with names.â

âFine.â

Was it fine?

Of course it was fine. What Marcia suggested was sensible.

He thought about posting Queen Victoria to his Aunt Molly.

He watched Susie.

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âSteak and chips.â

Hamish had only partly opened the kitchen door when Susieâs voice announced the menu. He blinked, gazing around the room in something approaching awe. This room was built to feed an army. It had huge overhead beams, a wonderful flag-stoned floor, an efficient gas range, as well as an old-fashioned slow combustion stove.

âHow do you like your steak?â she demanded.

She was being brisk. She wasnât crying. Emotion had been put on the backburner, and she was being fiercely efficient.

âMedium rare,â he said, and she smiled.

âGreat.â Then her smile faded, just a little. âMedium rare, eh? â

âIs that a problem?â

âIt might be,â she said cautiously. âIt depends.â

âOn what?â

âOn how it turns out. I was planning on beans on toast before you arrived. Much more dependable.â

âYou know where you are with a bean,â he agreed, and she looked at him with suspicion.

âDonât you give me a hard time. Kirstyâs bad enough.â

âKirsty?â

âMy sister. She and her husband are the local doctors. Kirsty said I have to give you something good to celebrate your first night here. She dropped off the steaks a few minutes ago. She would have stayed to meet you but she has evening clinic and was in a rush. But she left Boris, just in case you turn nasty.â

Boris wasâapparentlyâa nondescript, brownish dog of the Heinz variety who was currently lying under a high chair. A toddlerâa little girl about a year oldâwas waving a rusk above the dogâs head, and the dog had immolated himself, upside down, all legs in the air, waiting with eternal patience for the rusk to drop.

The dog hadnât so much as looked up as Hamish had entered. Every fibre of his being was tuned to the rusk. Some guard dog!

âWhat will Boris do if I turn nasty?â he asked, and Susie grinned.

âHeâll think of something. Heâs a very resourceful dog.â She produced a frying-pan and then looked doubtfully at the steaks.

The steaks lay in all their glory on a plate by the stove. They looked magnificent.

âHow are you planning on cooking them?â Hamish asked.

âIâll fry them,â she said with a vague attempt at confidence. âThat doesnât sound too difficult.â

âYouâre cooking chips?â

âTheyâre oven fries,â she confessed. âKirsty brought them as well. You put them in the oven, you set the timer for twenty minutes and you take them out again. Even I canât mess that up. Probably.â

She was making a huge effort to be cheerful, he thought, and heâd try to join her.

âTell me youâre not responsible for Queen Victoria,â he said and she grinned. She had a great grin, he thought. He was reminded suddenly of Jodie.

Jodie would love Loganaich Castle.

âAunty Deirdre is responsible for Queen Vic,â Susie told him. âAngus gave her carte blanche to decorate the castle as she saw

fitâbut he also gave her a very small budget. I think she did great.â

âShe surely did,â he said faintly. Susie brushed past him on her way to the fridge and he started feeling even more disoriented. Sheâd showered since heâd last seen her. Or since heâd last smelt her. She was wearing clean jeans and a soft pink T-shirt, tucked in. Her hair was still in a ponytail but it was almost controlled now. And she smelt like citrus. Fresh and lemony. Nice.

âMama,â the little girl said. âMama.â

âSweetheart,â Susie said, and that was enough to slam reality home. His mother always called him âsweetheartâ when she was trying to manipulate him.

He stopped thinking how nice she smelt, and thought instead how great it was that he had his Marcia and his whole life controlled, and heâd never have to cope with this sort of messy tearful existence.

Susie was carrying a tub of dripping to the stove. She scooped out a tablespoon or more into the frying pan. Then looked at it. Dubiously.

âWhat are you doing?â he said faintly, and she raised her eyebrows as if heâd said something stupid.

âCooking.â

âDeep frying or shallow frying?â

âIs there a difference?

He sighed. âYes. But with that amount of fat in the pan youâre doing neither. The chips are already in the oven?â

âYes.â

âHow long have they been in?â

âFive minutes.â

âHow do you have your steak?â

âAny way I can get it.â

âThen youâll have it medium rare as well, and I have five minutes before I start cooking. Can you find me an apron?â

âYouâre kidding.â

âNo.â

âGee,â she said, stunned, but willing not only to hand over cooking but to be admiring while she was at it. âYou really can cook?â

âI can cook steak.â

âWould you like to make a salad, too?â Her voice said she knew she was pushing her luck. It was almost teasing. âI can mix up chopped lettuce and tomato but anything else is problematic.â

He sighed. âI can make a salad. But I do need an apron.â

âAn apron,â she said, as if sheâd never heard of such a thing.

âSomething to coverââ

âI know what an apron is,â she said with dignity. She looked down at her faded, work-worn clothes. âI just never use one. But Iâll bet that Deirdre was an apron lady.â

She turned and searched a capacious drawer by the door. âHey!â She held up something that took Hamishâs breath away. Bright pink with purple roses, bib and skirt, the garment had flounces all round the edge and a huge pink ribbon at the back. âGood old Deirdre,â Susie said in satisfaction. âI knew she wouldnât let me down. Youâll look great in this.â

Yeah, right. He could just see the next front page of the *Financial Review*. There were guys back home whoâd kill to see this, and he was well known enough to hit the social pages of the tabloids.

He eyed Susie in suspicion. Mobile phones could also be cameras. If you wore an apron like this, you trusted no one.

âYou have a washing machine?â he demanded, trying not to sound desperate.

âI have a washing machine.â

âThen Iâll make do without the apron.â Some things were no-brainers. âJust this once.â

âThatâs big of you,â she told him, laying the frills aside with regret. âWhy are you tipping out the dripping?â

âThat was half an inch of fat, and if you thing Iâm spoiling my first Australian steak, you have another think coming.â

âOoh,â she said in mock admiration. âBossy as well as a good cook.â

âWatch your fries,â he told her, disconcerted.

âHey, weâll get on fine,â she said happily. âYou can cook. I canât. A marriage made in heaven.â

Then she realised what sheâd said and she blushed. The blush started from her eyes and moved out, and he thought, Sheâs

lovely. Sheâs just gorgeous.

Rose chortled from her high chair and Hamish allowed himself to be distracted. He needed to be distracted. Whew!

Rose was a chubby toddler, dressed only in a nappy and a grubby T-shirt reading My Aunty Went to New York and All She Brought Me Was One Lousy T-Shirt. She had flame-coloured curls, just like her mother, and huge green eyes that gazed at him as if expecting to be vastly entertained.

It was very disconcerting to be gazed at like that. Heâd never been gazed at like that.

In truth, Hamish had never met a toddler.

This situation was getting out of hand.

Rosie chortled again, raised her hand and lifted her rusk. It fell. On the floor beneath, on his back, Boris did a fast, curving slide so his mouth was right where it needed to be. The rusk disappeared without a trace.

Rose and her motherâand Hamishâall gazed at Boris. Boris gazed back up at Rose in adoration, and then opened his mouth wide again.

Hamish laughed.

Susie stared.

âWhat?â he said, disconcerted, and she flushed and turned away.

âN-nothing.â

âSomething.â

âItâs justâ¦ For a minuteâ¦â She took a deep breath. âThe Douglas men,â she said. âAngus and Rory had the same laugh. Low and rumbly and nice. And itâs here again. In this kitchen. Where it belongs.â

For a moment neither of them spoke. Did she know what power she had to move him? he wondered.

Heâd never known his father. Oh, he had a vague memory of someone being there, a grey, silent, ghost-like presence, but that was all. Heâd seen faded photographs of a man who didnât look like him. He had no connection at all.

And suddenly he did.

He didnât do emotion.

âIâm hardly a Douglas,â he said, more sharply than heâd intended. âMy father died when I was three, and Iâve had no

contact with anyone but my motherâs family.â

âBut you *are* a Douglas.â

âIn name only.â

âYou donât want to be a Douglas?â

Not if it means all this emotion, he thought, but he didnât say it.

âMove over,â he told her instead. âItâs time to put the steak on. Four minutes either side, which gives me time to whip up a salad. But thereâs no time for idle chat.â

âYou donât do idle chat?â

âNo.â

âIâll concentrate on my chips, then,â she told him, and proceeded to sit on the floor, flick on the oven light and watch. Which was distracting all on its own. âI know when to butt out where Iâm not wanted.â

âI didnât mean to be rude.â

âNeither did I,â she told him. âBut maybe thatâs the way we have to be. You donât want to be a Douglas. I canât bear to be near one. So letâs get tonight over with and then we can both move on in the direction we intend to go.â

CHAPTER THREE

SHE woke to singing.

She must be dreaming, she decided, and closed her eyes but a moment later she opened them again.

ââIâll be true to the song I sing. And live and die a pirate king.ââ

It was a rich, deep baritone, wafting in from the window out to the garden. Straight out of Gilbert and Sullivan.

Hamish?

It was early. Too early. Sheâd had trouble getting to sleep. Rosie was still soundly sleeping and she didnât have to get up yet. She didnât want to get up yet.

She closed her eyes.

ââIt is, it is a glorious thing, to be a pirate king.ââ

She opened one eye and looked at her clock.

Six a.m.

The man was mad, she decided. Singing in the vegetable garden at six in the morning.

It was a great voice.

OK, sheâd just look. She rolled out of bed, crawled across the floor under the level of the sill, then raised herself cautiously so she was just peekingâ¦

He was digging her path. *Her* path!

The window was open and the curtains were drawn. Before sheâd even thought logically, sheâd shoved her hands on the sill and swung herself out. âWhat do you think youâre doing?â

Hamish paused in mid-dig. He was wearing shorts. And boots.

Nothing else.

This wasnât a stockbrokerâs body, Susie thought as he set down his spade and decided what to say. The man had a serious six-pack. He was tanned and muscledâas if heâd spent half his life on a farm rather than in a stockbrokerâs office.

He had great legs.

Oh, for heavenâs sakeâ¦

âWhose boots are they?â she demanded, and then thought, What a ridiculous question to ask. But the boots were decrepitâsurely not carefully brought over from New York.

âI found them in the wet room,â he told her, looking like he was trying not smile. âThereâs a whole pile. I figured if I inherited the castle with contents included, then at least one lot of boots must be mine. Theyâre a size or two big but Iâm wearing two pairs of socks. What do you think? Will I take Manhattan by storm?â He raised a knee to hold up a boot for inspection.

Boris had been supervising the path-digging lying down. Now the big dog rose, put out a tongue and licked the specified boot. Just tastingâ¦

It was such a ridiculous statementâsuch a ridiculous situationâthat Susie started to giggle.

Then she suddenly thought about what she was wearing and stopped giggling. Maybe she should hop right back in through the window.

But heâd already noticed. âNice elephants,â he said politely.

And she thought, Yep, the window was a good idea. She was wearing a pair of shortâvery shortâboxer-type pyjama bottoms and a top that matched. Purple satin with yellow and crimson elephants.

There was a story behind these elephants. Susieâs two little step-nieces had wanted pyjamas with elephants on them. Harriet from the post office had been in Sydney for a week to visit an ailing sister and had thus been commissioned to find pyjama material with elephants. What sheâd found had been royal purple satin with yellow and red elephantsâthe lot going much cheaper by the roll. Harriet had been so pleased that sheâd bought the entire roll, and every second person in Dolphin Bay was now sporting elephant-covered nightwear.

âTheyâre home-made,â Susie managed. âI know the seamstress.â She managed a smile and Hamish thoughtânot for the first timeâwhat a lovely smile she had. âSheâll make you some too if you like.â

âNo, thank you,â he said hurriedly, and she grinned.

âYou could really take New York by storm with these.â

âI donât think Manhattan is ready for those pyjamas.â

There was a silence. She was trying not to look at his six-

pack. He looked like he was trying not to look at her pyjamas.

âWhat are you doing?â she asked, as much to break the silence as anything. Though it was obvious.

The garden was in the full fruit of late autumn. The fruit trees were laden. The lavender hedge was alive with early-morning bees, everything was neat and shipshape, and the only discordant note was the path sheâd started digging. Sheâd dug the first twenty yards. Twenty yards had taken her two days.

Hamish had dug another fifteen.

âI assume you wanted the rest dug,â he told her.

She bit her lip. âI did. Itâs justâ¦â

âIâve put the soil in the compost area,â he told her, guessing her qualms. âIâve left it separate so you can mix it as you want.â

One question answered.

âAnd the worms are in the yellow bucket,â he told her, answering her second.

He was laughing at her! Heâd done what represented over a dayâs work. She should be grateful. She was grateful! But he was laughing.

âWorms are important,â she said defensively, and he nodded.

âIâve always thought so. But not the kind that come out of your eyeballs.â

âThereâs no need to mock.â

âIâm not mocking.â

More silence.

âYou donât get muscles like those sitting behind a desk,â she said tentatively. She felt she shouldnât mention those musclesâbut she was unable to stop looking at them.

âI work out.â

âYou use a gym?â

âThereâs a gym in the building where I live.â

Of course. More silence while she tried again not to concentrate on muscles.

Oh, OK, sheâd look. Guys looked at good-looking women all the time. She could do a little payback.

âSo Iâm not doing the wrong thing?â he prompted when the silence got a bit stretchedâand she hauled her thoughts together and tried to think what she ought to be saying. What she should be looking at.

âOfâof course youâre not. Iâm very grateful.â

âWhat are you planning on doing once youâve dug?â

âI have a pile of pavers under the lemon tree.â She pointed. âThere.â

He looked. And winced. âThey look like they weigh a ton. You were going to lay them yourself?â

âOf course I was.â

âBut youâve been injured,â he said. âThe lawyer told meââ

âIâm fine.â

âYou limp.â

âI donât limp much. Iâm fine.â She took a deep breath, moving on. âNot that it matters. Theyâre your pavers now.â

âSusie, do you have to leave so soon?â

âIâ¦â

âIâm here for three weeks,â he said urgently. âI had a phone call this morning from the States. Thatâs why Iâm up early. A combination of jet-lag and a phone call at four. The best way to sell this placeââ

Do I want to hear this? Susie thought, but she hardly had a choice.

ââis via a realtor who specialises in selling exclusive country hotels. He comes, assesses potential, and if he likes what he sees then heâll put this place on his list of vendors and promote the place internationally. Heâll be in Australia next week. Marcia thinks I should persuade you to stay till then.â

Marcia? Susie wondered, but she didnât ask.

âWhy do you want me to stay?â

âYou know the history of the place. The agent holds that important. If people come to an exclusive location they want the personal touch. Theyâll want to know about Angus and the family and the castle back in Scotland. All its history.â

âIâll write it out for you.â

âIâll sell the place for more if youâre here to give a guided tour,â Hamish said flatly. âWidow of the incumbent earlâs heirâ¦â

âIf you think youâre going to play on Roryâs murder to get your *atmosphereâ*â

âI didnât say that.â

âYou didnât need to,â she told him, and glowered.

âBut will you stay? Iâll pay you.â

âWhy will you pay me?â

âWellâ¦â He considered. âYou could still pave the garden.â He eyed her, assessing and guessing her weakness. âYou would like to get this path finished.â

âI would,â she admitted, and bit her lip.

âThen Iâm happy to pay landscape gardening hourly rates. Think about it,â he saidâand went right back to digging. Leaving her to think about it.

Which slightly discomposed her. Sheâd expected moreâ¦argument?

Staying on here was dumb, she thought. More than dumb. She looked at Hamishâs broad, bare back and she thought that staying could be unsettling. Would be unsettling. She hadnât looked at another man since Rory had died and, of course, she never would, but there was that about Hamish which made her very solid foundations seem just a little shaky round the edges.

She didnât want her foundations shaken. Her world had been shaken quite enough for one lifetime.

So she should go. Immediately.

But thenâ¦

She and Rose had lived here for over a year. Sheâd started packing after Angus had died, but her efforts had been desultory to say the least. She needed to get organised. Todayâs deadline might not be actually feasible.

She thought about it for a bit more. She watched Hamish dig some more. Heâd have blisters, she decided, seeing him almost inconspicuously shift the spade in his hands. She knew what he was doing. Sheâd done it herself often and often. He was finding unblistered skin to work with.

He was strong and willing but he wasnât accustomed to this sort of work. He was a Manhattan money-maker.

The locals would hate the idea of the new laird being such a man.

But that started more ideas forming. Hamish was asking a favour of her. Maybe she could ask one of him. Angusâs death had left such a void. Maybe they could have a laird one last time, she thought. Maybeâ¦

âIâll do it, but not for payment,â she called out, and he looked up, surprised, as if he hadnât expected to see her still to be there.

âYouâll stay?â

âYes.â She grinned. âIâll even cook.â

âMore fries?â

âI can do toast, too. And porridge if youâre game.â

He smiled at that, and she thought, Yep, there it was again. The Douglas chuckle and the Douglas smile in a body that wasnât a Douglas body at all. It was a body she knew nothing about and wanted to know nothing about.

She had to get those foundations steady.

âI look forward to meeting your toast, but not your porridge, Mrs Douglas,â he told her formally, and she managed to smile back and then thought maybe smiling wasnât such a good idea. He didnât have enough clothes on. She didnât have enough clothes on. It was too early in the morning.

He was a Douglas!

âTomorrowâs the Dolphin Bay Harvest Thanksgiving fÃªte,â she told him as he started digging again. âWe need a laird.â

âPardon?â He bent to separate some worms and then dug a couple more spadefuls.

âThe laird opens the fÃªte. Itâs traditional. No oneâs doing it tomorrow because everyoneâs still mourning Angus. But not having anyone there will be awful. Maybe we should do it in stages. Maybe we could use you tomorrow as the last of the Douglases.â

His spade paused in mid airâand then kept digging. âYou know, I might not be the last of the Douglases,â he said cautiously. âThe Douglas clan appear to be quite prolific. In fact, if I give you the phone book you might find almost as many Douglases as Smiths, Greens and Nguyens.â

âNo, but as far as I know youâre the only Lord Douglas in this neck of the woods.â

âWhich leaves meâ¦where?â

âOpening the fÃªte tomorrow.â

Another pause in the digging. Another resumption. âWhich involves what exactly?â

âSaying a few words. Just âI now declare this fÃªte openâ. After the bagpipes stop.â

âBagpipes,â he said, even more cautiously, and Susie thought the man wasnât as silly as he looked. Actually, he didnât look

the least bit silly.

And heâd guessed where she was headed. She could see the suspicion growing and she almost giggled.

âItâs a very nice kilt,â she said.

He set down his spade and turned to her in all seriousness.

âDonât ask it of me, Susie. I have knobbly knees.â

She did giggle then. âI can see them from here. Theyâre very nice knees.â

âI only show them to other Douglases.â

âMe, you mean.â

âYou and my mother.â

âNotâ¦Marcia?â

âMarcia has the sense not to look,â he told her. âIâd never have exposed them to you but you woke unreasonably early. Normally I have huge signs out. CAUTION: EXPOSED KNEES. So that lets me out of fÃªte opening.â

âThen Iâm off to pack.â

âSusie, this is a business trip,â he said, and there was suddenly more than a trace of desperation in his voice. âIâm not an earl. Iâm not Lord Douglas. In this day and age it doesnât make any sense. I wonât use the title. Iâll sell the castle and Iâll get back to my ordinary life.â

âYou sound afraid,â she said, and he cast her a look that said she wasnât far off the mark.

âThatâs dumb. Why would I be afraid?â

âItâs not so scary, standing in a kilt and saying a few words.â

âPeople will expectââ

âTheyâll expect nothing,â she said softly. âThe people here loved Uncle Angus. He was their laird. You wonât know the story but this castle saved the town. After the war the men depended on the schools of couta to make their livingâgreat long fish you catch by trawling in relatively shallow water. But some diseaseâworms, actuallyâhit the couta, and the men didnât have boats big enough for deep-sea fishing. Everyone was starting to leave. It was either leave or starve. But then along came Angus. He saw this place, fell in love with it and realised the only thing that could keep it going was another industry. So he persuaded the guardians of his family trustâyour family trustâto let him rebuild his castle here. The men worked on the castle while they

gradually rebuilt the fishing fleet. The people here loved Angus to bits and his death has caused real heartache. You wearing a kilt tomorrowâno, it wonât bring Angus back, but maybe itâll fill a void that for many may seem unbearable.â

Emotion, Hamish thought. More emotion. But Susieâs chin was tilted upward. She was defiant rather than lachrymose, throwing him a dare.

Open a fÃªteâ¦

It was a dumb, emotional thing to do. It had no foundation in logic and he should run a mile.

âWhy are you digging my path?â she asked.

âI was bored.â

âWhat are you going to do until this assessor gets here?â

âIâll go through the castle books.â Iâll get rid of some kitsch, he thought, but he didnât say it. Marcia was researching a place where he could hire some decent antiques to make the place look firstclass.

Maybe Queen Vic could stayâ¦

Queen Vic was in a plastic gilt frame. Sheâd been a cheap print and was a bit frayed around the edges. Keeping Queen Vic would be a dumb, emotional decision and he needed to stay tight here.

âThe castle books are in the hands of the executors,â Susie told him. âMr OâShannasyâs the local solicitor but his office is always closed Fridays. That means you canât start work until Monday. Which leaves the weekend free for fair opening.â

âI have a path to dig.â

âItâs my path,â she said, almost belligerently, and then stopped. âI meanâ¦â

No emotion. âItâs your path until you leave,â he said hurriedly.

âWhich is today unless you open the fÃªte.â

âWhy is it so important?â

âI just donât want the stage to be empty.â

âItâs a sentimental gesture.â

âWhatâs wrong with that?â

âIâm a businessman.â

âYou can be a businessman again when you leave here. Be Lord Douglas for a bit. Itâs your title. Enjoy it.â

âI would have thought lords enjoy themselves byâ¦I donât

know, holding lavish banquets. Driving Lamborghinis.â

âYou can have porridge and toast for breakfast. Weâll put marmalade on top of the toast, banana on top of the porridge, and call it a banquet. And Iâll drive you to the fÃªte in Angusâs old Ford. It has four wheels, same as a Lamborghini. Whatâs your problem?â

âI donât have a kilt,â he said, backed against a figurative wall but still fighting.

âNo.â Her face grew thoughtful. âAnd Angusâs would be too small. He was a much shorter man.â She hesitated. He saw the telltale wash of emotion cross her face and he flinched. But she had hold of herself again. âMy husband used to come here often beforeâ¦before he went overseas and we were married. Angus had a kilt made for him from the family tartan. Youâre almost the same size.â

Great. Heâd go to a fÃªte wearing the kilt of this womanâs dead husband.

But sheâd read his expression.

âIâm not asking for sympathy here,â she told him, and there was suddenly anger flooding her voice. âYou can stop looking as if youâre expecting me to burst into tears and tell you youâre just like my Rory.â

âI neverâ¦â

He had.

âI donât need you,â she snapped.

âOf course you donât need me.â

âItâs just the townâ¦so many of the old peopleâ¦theyâll come tomorrow, and Angus has only been dead for a few weeks, and theyâll see the empty stage and itâll stay with them and spoil their fÃªte. If you get up in your kilt and open the thing and wander round for a bit and donât tell people youâre selling, just say youâre not exactly sure whatâs happening, then the locals will have a splendid talking point instead of a focus for grief. The fÃªte was threatening to be dismal. You have it in your power to retrieve things.â

âI donât wantââ

âYou want whatâs right for the castle,â she snapped. âYou want the best monetary outcome. You told me yourself you can get that if I stay on until the assessor comes. So use your head and not your heart, Hamish Douglas. Whereâs the sense in

refusing?â

She had a point. Butâ¦

âI donât think I want to,â he said weakly, and she cast him a look that contained pure triumph. She had him and she knew it.

âIâll go look out the kilt,â she told him. âYouâre skinnier than Rory. We may need to adjust it. And quit the digging. You have more blisters than you need already. Breakfast in half an hour?â

âErâ¦yes.â

âThe first of your many banquets here, my lord,â she told him. She grinnedâand went to find her lord a kilt.

Â

âHeâs like a fish out of water.â

Actually, he was in water. Hamish was in the shower. His bathroom was right above Susieâs and as sheâd dialled her sisterâs number heâd started singing. The Pirate King was being given another airing, and a good one. âHeâs here to make money out of the place,â she told Kirsty. âHeâs going to sell. I should hate him butâ¦â She hesitated. âItâs like heâs some big New York financier but thereâs someone else underneath.â

âSomeone nice?â

âHe sings,â Susie explained, and held the receiver out so Kirsty could hear.

âUmâ¦great,â Kirsty said, back on the line after a momentâs bemused listening. âThereâs lots of testosterone in that there baritone. Are you interested?â

Some questions were dumb. âWhy would I be interested?â Susie demanded. âAnyway, Iâm just ringing to tell you that you can come and take your dog back. Iâm quite safe. And heâs agreed to open the fÃªte tomorrow.â

âHeâs agreedâ¦â There was a momentâs stunned silence and then something that sounded like a sniff from the other end of the line. âHeâs opening the fÃªte? Wearing the Douglas tartan?â

âWearing the Douglas tartan.â

âOh, Susieâ¦â

âYou wonât weep on him, will you?â Susie asked, becoming nervous, and Kirsty sniffed again.

âNo, but everyone else will.â

âTheyâd better not. Heâll run.â

âOnce heâs opened the fÃªte he can run all he wants,â Kirsty said directly. âThat empty stage was going to seem awful. But for the opening to go to another Douglasâ¦ Itâll almost seem like a happy ending.â

âYeah, well itâs not,â Susie said, suddenly breathless. âOrâ¦well, I guess it is an ending and itâs better than it might be. Thisâll be something like closure.â

âBut heâs really nice?â Kirsty demanded, and Susie flushed. She was Kirstyâs twin and she knew where her sisterâs thoughts were headed, often before Kirsty did. She knew where they were headed now, and she had no wish to go there.

âMy daughter is attempting to climb onto the back of your dog,â she told her sister with what she hoped was dignity. âI need to go.â

And she replaced the receiver on any more conjecture.

Â

Things were formal at breakfast. Hamish was dressed again as he might dress for a casual stroll down Fifth Avenue. Understated. Expensive. Cool.

Susie had dressed in shorts and a T-shirt which stayed pristine until she gave Rose her first piece of toast and Rose gave it back. She was therefore decorated with a raspberry streak centre front. Not so cool.

No matter. There was a small glitch when Hamish refused porridge. Susie thought this was one of the few things she could cookâand what sort of a Douglas was he if he didnât eat porridge?âbut she finally decided magnanimously to overlook it. They ate their toast with only social pleasantries expressed between mouthfuls.

Hamish appeared not to notice Rosie and Boris doing their best to make him laugh. He didnât comment on Susieâs raspberry streak. He appeared to have switched into another mode, one where he was polite and courteous but otherwise remote.

Fine. She could handle this, she decided.

A non-porridge-eating Douglas.

They finished eating. Susie wiped off her small daughter. Then, somewhat at a loss, she offered a full tour and her offer

was accepted.

This was good, Susie thought as she led the way through the castle. She carried Rose, Boris following behind as she opened room after room and explained the contents. Formality would get them through the next few days. It was only when Hamish stopped being polite and grinned that her insides started doing funny things.

âThis is bedroom number sevenâ¦â

âI saw this yesterday,â Hamish said politely. âAll by myself.â

âYou looked through the bedrooms by yourself?â

âI was choosing one. You told me I could. Any on the first floor.â

âTheyâre your bedrooms,â she said, and flushed. âAm I boring you?â

âItâs a very nice castle.â

âIâm boring you.â

âWhat about the beach?â he asked. The sea was right out every north-facing window, tantalising with its sapphire shimmer.

âThereâs a track just over the road,â she told him. âWhen the place is turned into a hotel you may need to build an inclinator. Itâs a bit steep.â

âBut the track leads to the beach.â

âYes.â

âA swimmable beach?â

âVery much so.â

âYouâre going to offer to show me?â

âYou can find it yourself. You can scarcely miss it. Head north and when it feels wet youâve reached the sea.â

âDo Boris and Rose like the sea?â

âIâ¦ Yes.â Keep it formal. Keep it formal.

âIâll go and see it by myself, then, shall I?â

âIf you like.â Keep quiet, dummy.

âItâs safe for swimming?â

âItâs great for swimming.â

âIâll get changed then,â he said. âIâll be back for lunch.â

Keep quiet. Keep quietâ¦

She couldnât keep quiet.

âI canât get down to the beach by myself,â she said, sense

disappearing and desperation taking over.

This had been the hardest part of living here with Rose. With her weak legs, the track was too steep to negotiate carrying a baby, and to live so close and not have access almost killed her. She could only go to the beach when someone was there to help carry Rose. âNot withâ¦â Say it, she told herself. Say it. âIâI have a b-bad leg,â she stammered.

He paused. He looked at her.

Formality took a slight backward step.

âYou canât get down to the beach?â

âNot carrying Rose.â

âBut you like the beach?â

âI love the beach. So does Boris and so does Rose. We all love it.â

âSo if I carried Roseâ¦â

To hell with formality. âWe could all go,â she said, enthusiasm taking over. âI could pack a hamper. We could take an umbrella and a rug for Rose to snooze on when she gets tired.â

âHow long are we staying?â he demanded, startled.

âHours and hours,â she said happily. âIf Iâm leaving this place for good in a few days, then I need all the sea I can get. When this place is a luxury hotel itâll be beyond my reach for the rest of my life.â

âSo all I have to do is carry Rose.â

âAnd the hamper. And the picnic basket and rug. You may have to take two trips.â

âYouâre a manipulator.â

âThe beach is worth it.â

CHAPTER FOUR

He carried the hamper, the beach umbrella and the rug down to the beach and left them there. Boris accompanied him, bounding down the track with the air of a dog about to meet canine heaven. When Hamish returned for the next load, Boris bounded up again, panting with expectancy, seeming as anxious as Susie was that his pseudo-mistress wasnât left behind. Susie was waiting, dressed in a pale lemon sarong, her arms full of Rose and Roseâs necessities.

âHamish will take us to the sea,â Susie told Rose, handing her over, and the little girl beamed, leaned over and wrapped her arms around Hamishâs neck.

He froze. The feel of a babyâs arms feltâ¦weird. Really weird.

Hamish had never held a baby in his life and heâd expected itâherâto cry or at least hold herself rigid. Instead of which she clung happily to his neck and started crooning, âEe, ee, eeâ¦â

âShe hasnât quite got the hang of S,â Susie told him, and Rose giggled as if her mother had just made a wonderful joke.

âYouâre OK to get down yourself?â he asked, and Susieâs smile turned to a glower in an instant.

âIâve got down under worse conditions than this. Some Iâll tell you about it. You take Rose and Iâll follow.â

So he did, but he carried Rose slowly, not wanting to get too far ahead of Roseâs mother, aware that the climb was a struggle for Susie and she hurt more than she admitted. He thought suddenly that what he really wanted to do was scoop her up in his arms and carry her down, but even if he hadnât been carrying her child he knew that sheâd swipe away any such effort.

But finally they reached the sand. Boris was off chasing seagulls. The little cove was deserted. Susie lifted Rose from his arms and started undressing herâand Hamish had time to look around him and take stock.

Heâd never seen a beach like this. It was a cove, sheltered from rough seas or winds by two rocky outcrops reaching three

or four hundred yards from either side of the beach. The little cove was maybe two or three hundred yards longâno more. The sand was soft, golden and sun-warmed. There were two vast eucalypts somehow emerging from the base of the cliffs to throw dappled shade if you wanted to be in the shade. There were rock pools toward the end of the cove. The waves at one end of the cove were high enough to form low surf, but at the more sheltered end there were no waves at all. Here the water sloped out gently, making the sea a nursery pool to beat the finest nursery pool anyone could ever imagine.

âYou see why I cracked and asked for help?â Susie asked. She was kneeling on the rug, removing Rosieâs nappy and plastering her with sunblock. âI canât bear not to be down here.â

âWhy did you have to crack before you asked?â

She hesitated. âI donât like to ask for help.â

âItâs more than that, isnât it?â he said. âYouâre afraid of me?â

âNo. Iâ¦â

âWhat did my cousin do to you?â

âItâs not that.â

âTell me.â

She flinched. Carefully she replaced the tube of sunblock in her holdall and then set her naked daughter on the sand. Rose started crawling determinedly toward Boris. Seeing Boris was chasing gulls in circles, here was an occupation that was going to take some time.

Hamish waited, giving Susie space. Finally she sat back on her heels and gazed out to sea.

âThey were both your cousins,â she whispered. âKenneth and Rory. Kenneth killed Rory so heâd inherit all thisâand when he discovered I was pregnant he tried to kill me as well. He hauled me and my twin, Kirsty, onto a boat right here in this cove and tried to drive us onto rocks.â She shivered but then gave a tentative smile. âBut weâre tough. No one messes with the McMahon twins.â

âYouâre a twin?â

âYep. And proud of it. Kirsty fell for the local doctor and they married last year. She now has two little stepdaughters and is fast becoming a local.â

âBut you want to go home?â

âMy life is in the States. Itâs time to get on with it. You either get on with life or you die,â she said simply. âI was a mess for a while, but Iâve come out the other side.â

âSo why are you afraid of me?â

âIâm not afraid.â

âI think you are.â

âRose needs a swim,â she said, almost angrily. âItâs too good a day to mess with by talking about whatâs past.â

âI agree,â he told her. âI could use a swim, too.â

âThe wave end is better for swimming,â she told him. âRose and I use the end without waves.â

âDifferent ends. Now, how did I know you were going to say that?â

âJust swim,â she snapped. âEnough with the psychoanalysis. This might be the last time I swim in this place and I intend to enjoy it.â

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Susie spent the next hour in the shallows and she was aware of Hamish every single minute. She took Rosie up to her knees in water, then sat with the little girl on her lap while the wavelets washed over them. Rosie splashed and cooed and giggled and Susie giggled with herâbut still she watched Hamish.

He was a strong swimmer, she decided. He used a clean, efficient stroke that said heâd been properly trained and he wasnât out of practice. He took no chances in an unknown environment, not going deeper than chest depth but stroking strongly from one end of the cove to the other and back again. When he wearied of swimming he bodysurfed, catching the white breakers with an ease that said heâd done this, too.

He was glorying in the water, in the sun and in the day just as much as she was, she thought. She watched his lithe body slicing through the water with something akin to jealousy. He looked free. He was free to live in this place if he wanted.

He didnât want. He intended to make money from it and leave.

Finally Rose started wearying. She curled into her motherâs lap and snuggled and Susie struggled upright and carried her daughter up the beach to dry her off and give her lunch. She fed Rose and gave her a bottle.

While she fed her daughter Hamish still didnât come near. Instead he threw driftwood over and over into the waves for Boris. Boris would take as much of this as anyone would give him, and Hamish gave him a lot, but as Rose snuggled down and closed her eyes in satisfied sleep, Hamish came jogging up the beach to join them.

He looked fantastic, Susie thought. Wide shoulders tapering to narrow hips, not an ounce of spare flesh on him, his tanned skin coated in a fine mist of sand, his black curls flopping forward making him look almost endearingâ¦

Cut it out! she told herself urgently. Get your hormones back where they belong.

âThere are sandwiches here,â she managed. âRose and I have eaten. Would you like some?â

âFood!â He fell to his knees like a man who hadnât seen food for a week and as he bit into her sandwiches Susie had another of thoseâ¦moments. Watching him enjoy the food sheâd preparedâ¦ There was nothing sexy about it at all, she told herself crossly, but she knew that she lied.

âYou swim well,â she told him, and if she sounded stiff and formal there wasnât a blind thing she could do about it.

âI was raised in California,â he told her. âIâm an original beach bum. Iâve never seen a beach as good as this, though.â

âYouâre still tanned.â

âI have a penthouse with a sunroof. And a heated pool.â

Oh, of course.

âYouâre just a paddler?â he asked, polite as well.

She thought, Drat him. How dared he put her in this state of she didnât know what?

âI like swimming.â

âYou werenât swimming,â he pointed out, and she flushed.

âRight, like I can swim when I have an attached fourteen-month-old.â

âYouâd like to swim?â he asked, and she bit back another angry retort.

âIâm fine.â

âRose is asleep. You could swim now.â

âI donât like leaving Rose on the beach by herself.â

âSheâs not by herself,â he said gently. âSheâs with me.â

So she was. Her baby was soundly asleep. She wouldnât wake for a couple of hours. Hamish was offering her freedom, and sheâd really, really like a swim.

But something was holding her back. Not distrust, exactly. Moreâ¦

She couldnât put a finger on it.

âYou can trust me,â he said, forcing her to try.

âI know.â

âYouâll be able to see her all the time youâre swimming. Go on, Susie, you know youâd love to.â

She would.

âWhatâs stopping you?â

âNothing.â

âSwim,â he told her. âOr Iâll lift you up and hurl you into the waves with my bare hands.â

âIâd like to see you try.â

âI wouldnât,â he confessed. âI might have inherited a title, but Big Bad Sir Brian Blipping Villagers On the Head is a far cry from a wimpish stockbroker who values his back.â

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It was only Hamish who was making her nervous. Swimming didnât.

Susie did this often, whenever Kirsty brought her twins over. Theyâd take turns to play childminder while the other took off into deep water and gloried in the freedom the water allowed.

It did allow freedom. The car accident that had killed Rory had damaged Susieâs spine. Slowly, slowly she was recovering from the damage it had caused but she wasnât free to walk and run as sheâd like. Stiffness and residual pain held her back.

But in the waterâ¦

Sheâd always been better than Kirsty in the water. Sheâd captained her junior-high waterpolo team. Sheâd been selected to play for the state, and only the fact that her life had got busy had stopped her going further. But for Susie swimming was an extension of breathing.

Now she walked stiffly into the water, stood for one lovely, lingering, anticipatory momentâand then knifed forward into an oncoming wave.

Gorgeous. Just gorgeous. The moment she was through the

breaker she felt her other life kick in, the life sheâd known before the accident, before Roryâs death, before motherhood. She was a girl again, free, her body whole and healthy and ready for whatever the day should bring.

It almost gave her the courage to face the future.

She turned to the beach and Hamish was watching. Even from here she could see that he was tense. He was sitting on the sand with Boris beside him. His arm was draped over the dog. Rosie was curled up close by, sound asleep in the shade, but Hamish was still in the sun. He should be lying on the sun-warmed sand and snoozing, she thought, but he was bolt upright, watching.

He was playing lifeguard, she thought suddenly, recognising his tension for what it was. If she got into trouble heâd be down here in a minute, surging to her rescue.

She waved. He waved back but the tension didnât ease.

She grinnedâand then the smile died.

She liked it, she realised. She liked it a lot that he was playing lifeguard for her.

Whoâd play lifeguard for her when she went back to the States?

You wonât need a lifeguard, she told herself fiercely. Youâll be fine. Donât even think that you might still need someone. Youâve been depressed before and youâre not getting depressed again.

She turned to face the other end of the cove. She put her head downâand she swam.

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Hamish watched as Susie limped down to the shoreline and wasâ¦astonished. She was beautiful, he thought. Gorgeous.

But she was also damaged. She was wearing a bikini that showed off every lovely curve, but it also revealed a wide, jagged scar across the small of her back. Was this the back injury that caused her limp?

Sheâd lost a husband. She was raising a baby on her own.

He was kicking her out of her castle.

Something inside his gut clenched as he watched her walk into the waves. Emotional decisions were not appropriate here, he told himself fiercely. This castle was worth a small

fortuneâno, a large fortuneâand to keep a woman and a baby here in perpetuity was ridiculous. The lawyers had told him sheâd been well provided for, and sheâd reiterated that herself. She could go back to America and get on with whatever life sheâd had before sheâd met this Rory character and been dragged into this make-believe fantasy of titles and castles andâ¦emotion.

He continued to watch as she stood, thigh deep in the waves, seeming to simply soak in the sun. She gazed about her as if taking in the sheer beauty of the cove, though she must have seen it so many times.

She stilled, then knifed forward into the oncoming wave and he forgot about the beauty of the cove.

She simply disappeared. Her dive into the wave produced nary a splash. Her body became a streamlined torpedo, slicing down and under, and it was as if sheâd never been there.

She didnât surface.

He was standing up, startling Boris whoâd had his ears resting on his knees. Boris barked, expecting adventure, but Hamish had his eyes shaded. He was moving forward, trying to seeâ¦

She surfaced finally fifty yards from where sheâd gone under. One breath, a slight turn and then down under again, and he was searching once more.

Whereâ¦whereâ¦?

Twenty yards this time, only twenty yards and she was moving along the cove rather than out to sea. Another breath, hardly perceptibleâthe break of her head above water could hardly be seenâand then under again, swift and sure, like a sleek young seal, surfacing to breathe but all economy of effort underwater.

Heâd never seen anything like it. He thought he was a good swimmer, but she was magnificent.

Heâd run a few steps in those first panicked seconds and Boris was bouncing around his legs, barking, expecting excitement. He lifted a piece of driftwood and threw it into the shallows, pretending to any unseen onlooker that heâd stood specifically to do this. That he hadnât panicked. That the sight of Susie moving with such economy of actionâwith such beautyâdidnât have the power to move him.

Only, of course, it did have the power to move him. He feltâ¦

He didnât know how he felt.

Boris came streaming back up the beach, hauling his driftwood for another throw. The stick was laid at his feet and the big dog shook, sending a spray of sand and sea, hauling Hamishâs thoughts back to reality. To at least some semblance of normality.

âIâm going back to babysitting,â he told Boris. âIâm not watching.â

Boris put his head on the side and gazed at him in mute enquiry.

âWell, Iâm hardly a lifesaver,â he muttered, sitting on the beach, hugging the dog and staring out to sea. âShe can swim better than I can. Thereâs nothing I can do for your mistress, boy, except sit with her sleeping baby and give her a few more momentsâ freedom.â

She waved from behind the breakers and he waved back.

Freedomâ¦

She was glorying in her freedom, he thought, and suddenly he remembered his office back in Manhattan. It was a magnificent office. He had plate-glass windows that looked all the way to the Statue of Liberty in New York Harbor.

There was still plate glass between him and the sea.

âItâs just because youâve never had a holiday that youâre thinking like this,â he told himself, suddenly angry. âGet over it. Cut it out with the emotion, Douglas. You know where that gets you, and you donât want to go there.â

He lay back on the sand and closed his eyes.

Then he half opened one. Then he shrugged and sat up.

Heâd just watch.

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It had been a fabulous swim.

Susie came out of the water laughing with delight, pleasure and sheer wellbeing. OK, she was leaving this place, but its memories would stay with her for ever and one of them was this day. She shook herself like Boris, holding her hands out and wiggling her whole body so a spray of water went everywhere. Boris, whoâd bounded down the beach to meet her, backed off as

the water hit him, and she laughed with delight at her neat reversal of roles.

She looked up the beach and Hamish was watching her. She switched back. Sheâd had her time out.

Back to being the castle relic.

She walked up the beach and he rose to meet her, holding out her towel. She hesitated for a moment, just because the gesture seemed curiously intimate.

Which was dumb. It meant nothing. How many times had Kirsty done the same thing? She took the towel and retired behind it, enveloping her whole face so she didnât have to look at him.

âBest beach in the world,â he said softly, and she let her towel drop to her shoulders and tried to smile.

âIt is.â

âYouâll hate leaving it.â

âI will. But Iâve had it for over a year. Itâs time for someone else to enjoy it.â Her smile became a little more determined. âOr many someones. All the people whoâll come to your hotel.â

âItâs the sensible thing to do, to sell it.â

âIt is.â

âYou will be all right?â

âIâll be fine,â she told him, determined. âThank you for looking after Rose.â

âIâve never babysat before.â

âNever?â

âNo.â

âNo family?â

âNo brothers or sisters. An older cousin who was a creep.â

âI think thatâd be awful,â she said. âBeing an only kid. Being a twin was wonderful.â

He thought about that, and looked down at her sleeping baby. Another only kid? âRoseâ¦â

âIâll surround her with kids,â she said, determined. How was she going to do that? She didnât have a clue.

She was going home to juggle baby, career, life.

She was not going to let it get her down.

âYour sisterâs here?â

âYes.â

âShe has kids.â

âYes.â

âWhy donât you stay here?â

âAnd be dependent on Kirsty for the rest of my life? No, thanks very much.â

âIndependence can be hard.â

âI suspect youâre a master of it,â she said. âIâm just learning but Iâll manage.â

âSusieâ¦â he beganâand then paused as the sound of a motor cut the stillness. He turned to watch a dinghy putt-putt around the cove. It was a simple, two-person craft with a small motor that would have been dangerous on a day that was any less calm than this. But it was calm and the two people in the boat looked inordinately pleased with themselves. A middle-aged coupleâthe man in a loud Hawaiian shirt and the woman in a swimsuit that had even more gardenias on than her husbandâs shirtâwere heading straight for them.

As they came within earshot the man stood up in the boat, rocked precariously and yelled.

âAhoy. Can we land on this beach? Are there rocks?â

âNo rocks,â Susie yelled back, relieved her tete-a-tete was over.

They cruised towards the shore, a bit too fast. Neither got out of the boat until it hit sand. Then they sat in the rocking boat, removed their sandals with care and put their toes into the water as if expecting piranhas.

No piranhas.

âOoh, itâs lovely, Albert,â the lady said. âItâs not too cold at all.â She turned to them and beamed a welcome. âHi.â

They were Americans. The place was starting to be overrun with Americans, Susie thought. âHi,â she replied, while Hamish said nothing at all.

âWe just wanted to take your picture,â the woman told her, beaming still. âThatâs right, isnât it, Albert? We brought the boat round from Dolphin Bay harbour and I saw you through the fieldglasses with your baby asleep and your puppy, and you all look beautiful. I bet that dogâs got dingo in him, I said. And I said to Albert, Iâd like to take their picture, because you remind me so much of what we were at that age. And now lifeâs an

adventure and itâs wonderful but I just thoughtâ¦seeing you twoâ¦â Her beam faded a little. âYou donât mind, do you?â she asked, suddenly anxious that she might have offended the natives. âIf you give me your name and address Iâll send you a copy. Albert is a lovely photographer.â

Albert looked bashful, but combined beam and bashful very nicely.

âWeâre only in Australia for a week,â the woman went on. âFor five of those days Albert has a conference but I said I wasnât going home before Iâd met some real Australians. So I got a pin and closed my eyes and stuck it in a map of places we could get to from Sydney and here we are. And I know you arenât aboriginal or anything, but you so look like you belong. Anyway, can we take your picture?â

âUm,â Susie said with a sideways glance at the silent Hamish. âWhat do you thinkâ¦luv?â

He grinned. Her drawl had been an attempt to sound Australian but she hadnât quite managed it.

âGeez, darl, I dunno why not,â he drawled, and his accent was so much better than hers that she almost laughed out loud. âWe could do with one of them photo thingies to show the kiddies when they grow up.â

She choked. Albert suddenly looked suspicious.

âThey might already have a camera, Honey.â

âWeâd be very pleased to have our picture taken,â Susie said. This was such a glorious morning, she was determined that everyone could enjoy it. She glared at Hamish. âWhat myâ¦what he meant was thatâd itâd be an honour to have a picture taken by an American.â

âThatâs all right, then,â Honey said, obviously thinking the same thing. âCan you cuddle? I donât suppose you want to pick the baby up?â

âSheâs just gone to sleep,â Susie said. Enough was enough. But then she grinned and leaned down, hoisted the wet and sand-coated dog up and thrust him into Hamishâs arms. âThere you go, darl,â she said. âYou cuddle the dingo.â

The dingo stuck his nose into Hamishâs face and slurped.

âGee,â Hamish managed. âThanksâ¦darl.â

âJust stand behind the baby,â Honey urged. âSo we can get you all in the shot.â

They did, bemused.

âPut your arm round her,â Albert urged.

âItâs all I can do to hold the dingo,â Hamish muttered. Boris was wiggling like the crazy mutt he was. Ecstatic.

âIâll hold the back half,â Susie said and did that, catching Borisâs legs.

The dog was now upside down, his front end held by Hamish and his back half held by Susie.

âNow cuddle your wife,â Albert said,

âSheâs notââ

âCuddle me, darl,â Susie said sweetly. âYou know you want to.â

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He cuddled her. He stood on the sun-warmed beach, with a dog in his arms, with Rose curled up asleep at his feet, with a woman pressed against him and with his arm around her, and he smiled at the camera as if he meant it.

It was like an out-of-body experience, he thought. If Marcia could see him now sheâd think he must have an identical twin. This was nothing like he was. The self-contained Hamish Douglas was a world away. He should be in his office now, with his hair slicked down, wearing a suit and tie, in charge of his world.

Insteadâ¦

Susie was leaning against him. She was still cool to the touch after her swim. Heâd been getting hot on the beach and the cool of her body against his was great.

Not just the cool. The smell of her. The feel of herâ¦

She curved right where she ought to curve. His arm held her close and she used her free arm to tug him even closer. The feel of her fingers on his hip, the strength of her tugging him closeâ¦.

Whew.

He smiled at the camera but it was all he could do to manage it.

He needed to go home, he thought. He needed to put this place on the market and get out of here.

Why was he terrified?

A vision of his mother came back, his mother late at night, coming into his room, putting her head on his bed and sobbing

her heart out.

âI never should have loved. If Iâd known itâd hurt like this, I never, never would have loved him. Oh, God, Hamish, the painâ¦â

He withdrew. His arm dropped and Susie felt it and moved aside in an instant. It had been play-acting, he knew. She hadnât meant to hold him, to curve against him as if she belonged.

âWhere shall we send the pictures?â Honey asked, aware as they moved apart that the photo session was definitely over. There was something in their body language that told her there was no way sheâd get them back together again. âDo you have a permanent address? Somewhere we can send a letter?â

Susie gazed at her blankly.

âThese people think weâre dole bludgers, sleeping in the back of a clapped-out ute,â Hamish said, and managed a grin at his mastery of the language. And the knowledge that went with it. Uteâshort for utility vehicleâa pick-up truck. And dole bludger? Heâd heard the term on the plane. Theyâd been flying over the coast and the man in the seat beside him had waved to the beach below.

âThereâs a major social security problem in Australia,â heâd told Hamish. âThe weatherâs so good and the surfâs so good thereâs an army of kids who refuse to work. They go on social securityâthe doleâand spend their life surfing. Go up and down the coast looking for good surf, sleeping in the back of utes. Bloody dole bludgersâll be the ruination of this country.â

And it was too much for Susie. He saw the mischief lurking in her eyes and the laughter threatening to explode, and he opened his mouth to stop her but it was too late.

âWeâre no dole bludgers,â she told them, in a tone of offended virtue. âAnd in truth weâre not husband and wife. Iâll have you know that thisâ¦â she pointed to Hamish as sheâd point to some mummified Egyptian remains ââ¦is Lord Hamish Douglas, Earl of Loganaich. His address, of course, is Loganaich Castle, Dolphin Bay. And meâ¦ Iâm the castle relic. And gardener and dogsbody besides.â She motioned to Rose at her feet. âThereâs always a baby in these sorts of situations,â she told them. âBut itâs probably wiser not to ask any more questions.â

âYou realise theyâll still think weâre dole bludgers,â Hamish said, when he could get a grip on his laughter and was attempting to get a grip on reality. The couple were putt-putting back out of the cove, with Albert pausing to take one more shot before they rounded the headland and disappeared from view.

âYeah, weâre high on dope. Iâll probably get a visit from Social Security.â Susie chuckled. âI should have told them I was an Arabian princess. We would have just as much chance at belief.â

âBut weâve made their morning,â Hamish said. The tension he felt as heâd held Susie was dissipating, changing to something different. Shared pleasure in the pure ridiculousness of the moment. Laughter. It was a laughter he hadnât felt before. He feltâ¦free. âTheyâve got more local colour than they bargained for.â

âWhatâs the bet they go into the post office when they go back?â

âThe post office?â

âHarrietâs the postmistress and she has a huge sign out the front advertising information. Collecting and imparting information is a passion. If they go in and say theyâve met a crazy beach bum who calls himself a lord, theyâll get told exactly whatâs what and theyâll be back here for more pictures.â

âWeâll retire behind our castle walls and pull up the drawbridge.â

âIf only it were that easy,â Susie said, and the laughter slipped a little. âIâ¦ Maybe we should go up now. I want to get some paving done this afternoon.â

âI need to do some cataloguing.â

âCataloguing?â

âMarcia says I should make lists of contents.â

âSure.â She eyed him with more than a little disquiet. âWhat will you do with Ernst and Eric?â

âWho?â

âSuits of armour.â

âUmâ¦â Heâd seen them. Of course heâd seen them. One could hardly miss them. âI might give them to a welfare shop,â he ventured. âIf I can find a welfare shop thatâll take them.â

âIâll buy them.â

âWhy on earth,â he said cautiously, âwould you want two

imitation suits of armour that stand eight feet high and are enough to scare the socks off anyone who comes near?â

âWhen I go home I wonât have Boris,â she said with dignity. âI need Eric and Ernst. Besides, theyâre excellent conversationalists. Weâve reached consensus on most important political points but the ramifications of the Kyoto agreement in developing countries still needs some fine tuning.â

He stared at her.

Then he burst out laughing.

She looked affronted. âYou canât think the ramifications of such an agreement are a laughing matter?â

âNo,â he said at once, wiping the grin off his face. âTheyâre very serious indeed. Only last week I was telling my potted palmââ

âThereâs no need to mock.â

âIâm not mocking. But Ernst and Eric are yours,â he told her. âAbsolutely. Who am I to separate a woman from her political sparring partners? How are you going to get them home?â

âI guess they wonât let me take them on the plane?â

âYou could see if you could get them diplomatic passports. I could make a few phone calls. Eric and Ernst, born in China and holding views that are decidedly left-wingâ¦or I assume theyâre left-wing?â

âItâs dangerous to assume anything about Ernst and Eric,â she said in a voice that was none too steady.

âI wonât. Iâll approach the situation with diplomatic caution. But weâll do our best, Susie Douglas. When you leave for America Iâd very much like to see Ernst on one side of you on the plane and Eric on the other.â

âEric is a vegetarian,â she said with such promptness that he blinked. âAnd Ernst hates sitting over a wing.â

He choked. She was standing in front of him, all earnestness, the sun glinting on her gorgeous hair, the laughter in her eyes conflicting with the prim schoolteacher voice and he feltâ¦he feltâ¦

âIâll see what I can do,â he managed. âBut meanwhile I think we should pack up for the day. I think Iâve had a bit too much sun.â

CHAPTER FIVE

THEY were formal for the rest of the day. Formal to the point of avoiding each other. Hamish did a bit of cataloguing but there wasnât much point cataloguing imitation chandeliers. Susie did a bit of packing but her heart wasnât in that either.

They met briefly for dinner. âSoup and toast,â Susie decreed, and Hamish didnât argue. He ate his soup and toast, and then later, when Susie had gone to bed, he ate more toast. Tomorrow heâd have to go on a forage into town and find some decent food, he decided. Then he remembered the next day was the day of the fÃªte and he felt so faint-hearted that he stopped feeling hungry and went back to bed and stared at the ceiling for a while.

He was right out of his comfort zone. Jodie had told him this was a holiday. Werenât holidays meant to make you feel rested?

The sounds of the sea were wafting in his open window but the rest of the world was silent. After the buzzing background hum of Manhattan this seemed like another world. It was so silent it soundedâ¦noisy? The absence of traffic sounds was like white noise.

He lay and listened and decided he was homesick for Manhattan. For his black and grey penthouse, his austere bathroom without kings or queens watching from gilt frames, for his traffic noiseâ¦

For Marcia? Of course for Marcia.

Who was he kidding? He wasnât homesick. He didnât know what he was. Finally he drifted into sleep where Marcia and Jodie and Susie all jostled for position. Marcia was silently, scornfully watching. Jodie was standing with hands on hips, daring him to be different. Susie was laughing.

But while he watched, Susieâs laughter turned to tears and he woke in a cold sweat.

And Susie was no longer in his dream. She was standing in the open doorway and she was neither laughing or crying.

She was holding a kilt.

âBehold your valet, my lord,â she told him. âYour kilt and all your other various appendages await your noble personage.â

He sat up fast. Then he remembered he wasnât wearing pyjamas. He grabbed his sheetâand he blinked at the apparition in the doorway.

Susie was dressed in tartan.

She wasnât wearing a kilt. She was wearing royal blue Capri pants, stretching neatly around every delicious curve, and a gorgeous little top, in the same tartan as the kilt she was holding out for him to wear. Her hair was tied up in some complex knot on top, and it was caught up in a tartan ribbon.

âWhat are you staring at?â she asked.

âThe tartanâ¦â

âYou might be the head of the clan but Iâm a Douglas, too.â

This woman was his family, he thought, dazed.

Move on. Family was a scary thought. His eyes fell to the kilt she was holding out.

âIâm not wearing that.â

âYou promised,â she said with something akin to forcefulness. âYou canât back out now, your Lordship. Iâve promised as well.â

âYouâve promised?â

âWell, you promised first. You said you would, and now Iâve telephoned the organisers and theyâve told everyone youâre coming. Theyâve trucked in the Barram pipe band with an extra piper this year, âcos last time the piper had a wee bit too much whisky on the bus on the way here and didnât perform to expectation. So thereâs two pipers to pipe you on stage, your Lordship, and a whole pipe band besides, and the Brownies are doing a guard of honour especially.â

âThe Brownies?â To say he was hornswoggled was an understatement. âWhat on earth are Brownies?â

âScary little brown persons,â she said. âYou must have heard of them. They sell cookies and do bob-a-job, only now itâs two dollars and you have to sign forms in triplicate saying they canât hurt themselves when they shine your shoes.â

âIâm lost,â he complained, and she grinned.

âFine. Stay that way. Ask no questions, just smile and wave like the Queen Mum. You want me to help you to dress?â

âNo!â

âOnly offering. I thought you might have trouble with your sporran.â

âAn earl,â he said with cautious dignity, âespecially the ninth Earl of Loganaich of the mighty clan Douglas, can surely manage his own sporran.â

âTricky things, sporrans.â

âNot to us earls.â

âWell, then,â she said cheerfully. She walked across and dumped a kilt, what looked like a small mountain of spare tartan fabric, tassles and toggles, a purse of some description and a beret with a feather on his bedside chair. Boris followed behind, looking interested.

âThere you go, your Lordship,â she said happily. âEverything you need to look shipshape. Come on, Boris.â

âBoris can help,â he said graciously, and her grin widened.

âIâll leave you with your valet, then, shall I, my lord? Porridge in the kitchen in thirty minutes?â

âToast.â

âIf youâre wearing a sporran you need porridge.â

âToast,â he said in something akin to desperation. âAs the leader of your clan I demand toast.â

She chuckled. âOoh, I love a forceful manâ¦in a kilt.â

âSusieâ¦â

She got her features back under control with difficulty. She was back to a grin only. âYour wish is my command,â she said. âSir.â He got a sharp salute, clicked heels and she was gone, leaving him alone with his valet.

âBorisâ¦â he said cautiously, eyeing his pile of tartan as if it might bite. âWhat do you think a sporran might be?â

It took him a while. It took him close to an hour, really, but if he was going to do this thing he might as well do it right. By the time he had every pleat in place, every toggle where it was supposed to be toggling, and the feather in his cap at just the right angle he felt like heâd done a full dayâs work. He gazed in the mirror and thought he had done a good dayâs work. He looked unbelievable.

Boris was sitting watching with the patience of all good valets, and when Hamish finally adjusted his cap and looked at

the final result the dog gave a deep low woof, as if in appreciation.

âNot bad at all,â Hamish told the dog. âI wish Jodie could see me now.â

And Marcia?

Marcia couldnât help but be impressed with this, he thought, but it was Jodie he thought of. Jodie would look at him and whistle, and giggle.

Like Susie giggled. Susie and Jodieâ¦

Two unlikely women in his life. Jodie was no longer part of what he did. She was making choir stalls with her Nick. Ridiculous. How could she make any money doing that?

And Susieâ¦ In a couple of weeks Susie would be a memory as well and heâd be left with Marcia.

Which was the way he wanted it.

âPorridge!â The yell from below stairs startled him out of his reverie. âOn the table. Now.â

He crossed to the landing. Took a deep breath. Swelled his chest.

âToast!â he yelled back. âWoman!â

She emerged from the kitchen and gazed upward. And froze. Her eyes took in his appearance, from the tip of his shoes, his long socks with their tassles, up to the featherâ¦

He felt like blushing.

âWow,â she said at last on a long note of awed discovery. âOh, Hamish, wow. Theyâre going to love you.â

âWho?â

âAll the ladies of Dolphin Bay,â she said simply. âMe, too. What a hunk. Do you have everything in the right place?â

âI think so,â he said, still trying not to blush.

âAnd youâve got the appropriate attire underneath?â

âDonât even go there.â He stepped back from the balustradeâfastâand she chuckled.

âNo matter. Iâve never seen such an impressive Scottish heroâand Iâve seen *Braveheart.*â

âIâd imagine that those guys might be a bit handier with their weaponry than I am,â he said, still cautious. âIâm all froth and no substance.â

âYou certainly look like substance. Porridge now, sir. Double

helping if you like.â

âSusieâ¦â

âYes, sir?â

âI thought I made myself clear. Toast.â

âThereâs a bit of a problem,â she confessed. âIf Iâd seen your knees before this, I might have concentrated a bit more. Very good at focussing the mind, those knees.â

This was ridiculous. He wanted his kilt lowered.

âSo whatâs happened to my toast?â he managed.

âI burnt two lots,â she confessed. âI was thinking about Angus. And Priscilla.â

âPriscilla?â

âAngusâs pumpkin. Sheâs going to win today. Biggest pumpkin on show. I ended up with only one slice of bread left and Rose wanted that for toast fingers in her egg.â She took a deep breath and fixed him with a look that told him he was going to get a lecture, right now.

âHamish, you might tell me you belong in New Yorkâyou might tell me youâre not really an earlâbut anyone seeing those knees knows for sure that youâve found your home right here. Youâre the ninth Earl of Loganaich and you just need to forget all those silly ideas of being anyone else, including a toast eater, and learn to like porridge. Now, enough argument. I have a team of men arriving in ten minutes to help load Priscilla onto the trailer. Soâwhat do they say? Save your breath to cool your porridgeâmy lord.â She smiled sweetly up at him. âCome and get it while itâs hot.â

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It was like an out-of-body experience.

Firstly there was the fairground itself. It was nestled between two hills, with the harbour and the town on one side and bushland on the other. One could stroll around the fairground, walk a short distance to the shops or to the boats, retreat into the bushâas a few young couples showed every sign of doing even this early onâor if it all got too hot one could disappear to the beach for a quick swim.

Susie pulled her little car into the parking lot and Hamish gazed around, stunned. It was a fantastic, colourful mix of everything. Everyone. Grizzled farmers, kids with fairy floss, old

ladies in wheelchairs. Gorgeous young things kitted to the nines in full dressage gear ready for the equestrian events. Kids in bathing costumes, obviously torn between beach and fair. A clown on stilts lurching from car to car and using the bonnets of the cars to steady himself.

The clown ended up right by them as they parked, and he lurched a little more, made a rush and hit their trailer. By the time they emerged he was dusting himself and staggering to his feet, pushing himself up against their pumpkin. Priscilla was almost as high as he was.

âYou hurt that pumpkin and youâre dead meat, Jake Cameron,â Susie told him, clearly unmoved by clowns tumbling into her trailer. âIf thereâs so much as a blemish on my pumpkin, itâs disqualified.â

âHi, Susie,â the clown said, removing a bulbous nose. âGreat to see you, too.â

âI didnât know you rode stilts.â

âI donât,â Jake said morosely. âBut the kidsâ schoolteacher asked for volunteers and the twins volunteered me. Itâs not going to work. The kids have been coaching me for weeks and all thatâs going to happen is that I break my neck. Whoâs going to fix me up then, I want to know?â

âKirstyâs really good at broken spines,â Susie said, and grinned. âOr failing that, sheâs specially trained in palliative care. If you die youâll die in the best of hands.â She turned to Hamish, who was feeling vaguely better that he wasnât the only ridiculously clad person here. âHamish, this is Dr Jake Cameron. Jakeâs my brother-in-law. Jake and Kirsty are Dolphin Bayâs doctors.â

âHey!â Jake said, holding out a red-gloved, vast-fingered paw. âYouâre the new earl. Welcome to Dolphin Bay, mate. You want to find a beer?â

Beer sounded fantastic to Hamishâbut Susieâs hand was on his arm and she was holding on like he wasnât going anywhere.

âHamish is due at the opening ceremony in ten minutes.â

âNo beer until youâve done your duty,â Jake said sympathetically. âBut meâ¦ Iâve been all round the fairground on these damned stilts, risking life and limb at every step. Iâve added local colour for all Iâm worth and Iâm done. Off duty.

Beer it is.â

âSo who looks after the kids when they fall off the Ferris wheel?â Susie demanded.

âHeaven forbid,â Jake said. âBut Kirstyâs official medical officer for the day. Sheâs taken the pledge for the next few months so Iâm a free man.â

âJakeâ¦â Susie said, and stopped. There was a pause. A pregnant pause. âSheâs taken the pledgeâ¦ Are you saying what I think youâre saying?â

Jake replaced his nose. Fast. âWhoops,â he said, backing off. âNo, I didnât say that. Gotta go. Take care of your earl.â

âI will,â Susie said, but still looking very oddly indeed at her brother-in-law. âWhereâs Kirsty?â

âAvoiding you, I suspect,â Jake said. âSee you.â And he took himself off like a man hunted.

âWhat was that about?â Hamish asked, watching the very speedy retreat of the scarlet and purple patchwork clown.

âOh, if she isâ¦â Susie said. âHow can I go home?â She caught herself. âNo. I must. Business. Letâs get you to the stage.â

âDo I really need to?â

âOf course you need to,â she said, astonished. âEveryone plays their part. Youâre part of this community now, Hamish Douglas, like it or not, and at least weâre not asking you to say your speech while youâre wearing stilts.â

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His speech was astonishing all by itself.

The sensation of being piped onto the stage, of every face in the fairground straining to see him, of a gasp of approval as he finally reached the dais and the sound of the pipes fell awayâ¦

Susie was right, he thought, appreciating the drama of the situation. If Angus had done this for the last forty years, this small ceremony would be sorely missedâand how much worse it would be because Angus was dead.

Times changed. The time of having a laird in Castle Douglas was over, and people had to accept it, but at least he could do as Susie suggested now. He could play his part.

Speech. He had to make a speech. Not a âtake over the companyâ sort of speech, not now, but something with, God help him, emotion.

Just this once.

And in the end, the words came.

âI canât replace my Uncle Angus,â he told the crowd, tentative at first but growing surer as he saw by their smiles that just standing up here in the right tartan was enough to plug the void. âI canât replace Lord Angus Douglas, Earl of Loganaich. I donât want to. But the house of Douglas has been associated with Dolphin Bay for so long that the connection will never die. As long as Castle Loganaich stands, weâll remember the link between castle and town. Weâll remember the friendship, the love, the good times and the bad. Lord Angusâs death was a low point but he lived a full life with his beloved Deirdre, both of them surrounded by this town full of their friends.â He hesitated.

âPlus the odd monarch in the bathrooms,â he added, and there was a ripple of delighted laugher. Most people here had at least heard of Queen Vic.

But Hamish hadnât yet finished. He was on a roll. Maybe he could be a lord after all. âAngusâs legacy remains in the laughter and the camaraderie Iâm seeing here,â he told them. âAngus would wantâAngus would insistâthat life goes on and that everyone here enjoy themselves to the full. So I, Hamish Douglas, ninth Earl of Loganaich, make this my first public decree. That this fair is officially open and that everyone here proceed to have a very good time. And after the pumpkin judgingâ¦ As Lord Douglas, I decree that everyone here take home a slab of pumpkin so I donât get landed with pumpkin pie for the rest of my life.â

Hooray. Heâd done it. There was cheering and more laughter. The pipes started up again and Hamish made his way off the stage to find Susie smiling at him through tears.

âOh, Hamish, that was wonderful.â

âThereâs no need to cry,â he said abruptly and turned away. Drat, he was almost teary himself.

His laughter faded. Heâd almost been enjoying himself but tears always did this. They snapped him right back to dreary reality. Tears in a situation like this were ridiculous. And now, if Susie not only cried but infected him with itâ¦

No!

âPumpkin judging,â someone yelled. âWeâre waiting on the Douglas pumpkin.â

âOoh.â Susieâs tears were gone in an instant and she turned to a middle-aged lady beside her. âHarriet, can you take Rose for a bit?â She thrust her baby forward, but Rose obviously knew the lady who Hamish recognised as the postmistress. Heâd stopped and asked directions from her when heâd arrived.

âCome on.â Susie was clutching his hand and towing him through the crowd and people were laughing and parting to let them through. âWeâve got a date with destinyâright now.â

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Their pumpkin won. It was the fairâs biggest pumpkin, with trophy and certificate to prove it. The second biggest was entered by a withered old man who didnât seem the least bit upset about losing.

Or maybe he did. He laughed and cheered with the rest of them when the pumpkins were weighed, but as the trophy was given to a flushed and triumphant Susie, the elderly man turned to Hamish and an errant tear was rolling down his wrinkled cheek.

More tears!

âHe knew, dammit,â the old man said, and he reached out and wrung Hamishâs hand so hard that it hurt. âYour uncle was the best mate a man could have. He knew heâd beaten me this year, damn him. He knew he was a winner. I wouldnât have wanted him to go any other way but hell, I miss him.â He sniffed and his wife darted forward and hugged him and led him off to the beer tent.

Susie came down from the dais, clutching her trophy and certificate, and she watched him go and sniffed again.

âI need a hanky,â she said, helpless with her hands full, and Hamish was forced to find hisâfrom his sporranâand then hold her trophy while she blew her nose. Hard.

âI donât want it back,â he said faintly, and she managed a smile through tears.

âIâm sorry. I know guys hate tears. Itâs only Benâ¦â She motioned to where the old man was disappearing beerwards.

âHe was crying, too,â Hamish said, and if he sounded a bit desperate then he couldnât help it.

âAunty Susie! Aunty Susie!â There were shrieks from behind

them and he turned to see two pigtailed urchins bearing down on them. Two little girls aged about five, each liberally spattered with what looked like a mix of fairy floss and chocolate ice cream, raced up to them with excitement âAunty Susie, Mummyâs got a baby for you.â

âA baby?â Susie stood stock still and the colour drained from her face. âI knew it. I knewâ¦â

âWhatâs wrong?â Hamish asked before he could help himself.

âSheâs pregnant. I knewâ¦â

âHi.â Coming up behind the twins was a woman who was the mirror image of Susie. The likeness was so extraordinary that he blinked.

âKirsty, I presume,â he said, because Susie had retired behind his handkerchief again. Oh, for heavenâs sake.

âIâm Kirsty.â A cool, firm hand was placed in his. She smiled and her smile was the same as Susieâs. Or maybe not. Maybe not quite as lovely?

That was a dumb thing to think. At least this woman wasnât crying.

âWhy is Susie crying?â she asked, and he looked exasperated.

âBecause her pumpkin won. I think.â

He expected sympathy and mutual confusion. Instead, Kirsty dropped his hand and enveloped Susie in a hug.

âOh, sweetheart, Iâm sorry. He couldnât seeâ¦â

âHe did see,â Susie said, hiccuping on a sob. âHe knew. I told you. I snuck into Benâs back yard before he died and I measured it and Angus knew his would be the winner. And I bet he can see us now.â

âThen whatâ?â

âThe twins. They saidâ¦a baby.â

Kirsty let her arms drop. She looked exasperated. âThey didnât say a baby.â

âThey did.â

âThey meant a puppy.â

âA puppy?â Susie lowered the handkerchief and looked out cautiously from behind it. Ready to retire again at any minute. âWhat do you mean?â

âThis.â Kirsty motioned behind her. âWe want our Boris back, but weâve decided you need a dog.â

A small boy was bringing up the rear. He was carryingâ¦ What was he carrying?

A puppy.

The puppy was just about the weirdest dog Hamish had ever seen. She was brown, white and tubby, with long, floppy ears, Borisâs expressive eyes, a stretched-out body with a puddingy tummy, a tail that added another twelve inches in lengthâand legs that were about three inches long.

âWhat is it?â Susie asked, cautious to say the least.

âThis is our gift to you,â Kirsty said expansively and grinned. âTo stop Rose being an only child.â She motioned to the small boy holding the pup. âSusie, this is Adam, and Adamâs pup. Now sheâs your pup.â

âWhatâ¦?â

âSheâs courtesy of Boris,â she explained, sounding exasperated. âYou know Jake inherited Boris from Miss Pritchard? Jake sort of assumedâas Boris was eight years old and Miss Pritchard was a civically responsible personâthat Boris would have been neutered in the long distant past. OK, he should have checked, but he didnât. He didnât really think about it, until Adamâs dachshund came into season. We share a back fence and events took their course. Even then we didnât realise until Daisy Dachshund produced one sad pup. Now that sheâs a few weeks old, the fatherâs obvious.â

âSad pup?â Susie said warily, while Hamish looked on, much as one might look through a time screen to another world.

âWell, maybe sheâs not exactly sad, are you, sweetheart?â Kirsty said, lifting the pup from Adamâs hands and holding her up for inspection. âMaybe sheâs moreâ¦loopy. Sheâs just won cutest puppy in show. Pup, meet Susie. Susie, meet pup.â

âHi, pup,â Susie said, still cautious.

The pup wagged her tail. Her whole body wriggled, like a cute and furry eel.

âAnyway, Jake and I were watching the puppy judging and it suddenly occurred to us that if youâre insisting on returning to America you need something to remember us by. And something to guard you. What better than a pup? We talked to Adamâs parents and, amazingly, theyâre delighted. Even Adamâs cool with it. I donât think this puppy fits what he thinks of as a real boyâs dog. I know thereâll be issues with quarantine but the dog-

judging people say itâs possible to take pups into the US from here, and Jake and I will pay.â

Susie seemed almost overwhelmed. She sniffed. âOh, Kirstyâ¦â

âI donât have any more handkerchiefs,â Jake said, desperate.

âYou need a truckload when Susieâs around,â Kirsty said cheerfully. âWhat do you think, Suze?â

âOh,â Susie said, taking the puppy and holding her close. âOhâ¦â

âI think I hear a beer calling,â Hamish said faintly. âIs Jake in the beer tent?â

Kirsty grinned at him, not unsympathetic. âWeâre all a bit much, arenât we? But your speechâ¦ All I had to do was look at you and I got teary.â

âSusie!â Harriet, the postmistress, was making her way determinedly through the crowd toward them, carrying Rose toward her mother. âI think your daughter needs a nappy change.â

Hamish was backing already but he backed a few more feet at that. Fast. âI can definitely hear a beer calling,â he muttered.

But Harriet wasnât about to let Hamish escape. âOoh, look at you,â she exclaimed, and thrust Rose at her mother, who proceeded to juggle toddler and puppy with aplomb. The elderly postmistress put an arm round Hamishâs shoulders and beamed in possessive enthusiasm. She was a big lady, buxom and beaming, with a tight frizzed perm and painted lips that seemed to have a life of their own. âLook at me,â she crowed. âMe and Lord Hamish. Take a picture of us, someone, so I can put it up on the post-office wall.â

âI needââ

âHey, but it shouldnât be me.â Harriet suddenly corrected herself, whisking herself out of his arms and thrusting Susie forward with an air of enormous personal sacrifice. âIt should be you. Oh, Susie, wouldnât that be something? You and the new laird. Two Douglases finally finding their place, side by side.â

Susie choked, but she had no say in the matter. Sheâd been thrust next to Hamish and cameras were flashing, just the same as theyâd been yesterday on the beach, only worse.

Much worse.

Hamish Douglas was suddenly being photographed with Mrs

Douglas, Rosie Douglas and dog.

Things were spiralling out of control here, Hamish thought desperately, and a man had to do what a man had to do.

He put Susieâand appendagesâcarefully away from him and took two more steps back. Two long steps back.

âI need to find Jake,â he said, in tones he hoped were careful and measured and nowhere as hysterical as he felt. âAnd thenâ¦ I think itâs wise if I stop all conjecture about me andâ¦me and Susie right now. Iâm engaged to a young lady called Marcia Vinel and sheâs arriving here the day after tomorrow.â

CHAPTER SIX

HAMISH spent the rest of the day being inspected. From every angle. Susie had been right when sheâd said his presence would take everyoneâs mind off their loss. He could not only hear the buzz his presence was making. He could feel it. He was whispered about, talked about, watchedâ¦.

âI need to get this kilt off,â he told Jake. âDid I ever wolf-whistle a woman for having great legs? Kill me now. I deserve it. Everyoneâs staring at my knees.â

âTheyâre staring at the whole package,â Jake said. âAnd you can forget any sympathy from this direction. Youâre not wearing size twenty purple and red shoes. My feet are killing me.â

âDid Susie tell me you were a surgeon in the city before you were married?â Hamish said curiously. âWhat on earth made you move here?â

âLife,â Jake said, and Hamish looked out over the fairground and shuddered.

âNot my idea of life.â

âAnd your idea of life would beâ¦â

âControl,â Hamish said forcefully. âKnowing what Iâm waking up to every morning.â

âI know what Iâm waking up to every morning,â Jake said peaceably. âChaos. I wouldnât have it any other way.â

âPoles apart,â Hamish said morosely. Then he thought of another issue. âAnd what the hell are you about, giving Susie a dog? Hasnât she got enough to cope with? Sheâs got to make her way in America, get a career going. Howâs she going to handle a dog?â

âThe heart expands to fit all comers,â Jake said and grinned. âIâm a doctor, you know. Thatâs a very medical sort of diagnosis.â

âSure it does,â Hamish snapped. âSusieâs now been loaded with a mutt who sheâll have to love whether she wants to or not.â

âLove isnât the same as provide for,â Jake said, looking at

him curiously. âItâs a bit different. Sure, it means more work but to not accept itâ¦â

âYouâre telling me there are any real advantages in her getting a dog?â

âKirstyâs her twin,â Jake said definitely. âIf Kirsty says she needs a dog, then she needs a dog. Sheâs lonely as hell.â

âDogs donât fix loneliness.â

âThey do a bit,â Jake said. âAnyway, the dog wasnât my decision, mate. Kirsty thinks itâs a good idea and getting between the twins is like dividing the Red Sea. Itâd take a force bigger than I have at my disposal. Theyâre inseparable.â

âBut Susieâs going home.â

âThere is that,â Jake said. He surveyed Hamish thoughtfully and Hamish lifted his beer and studied the dregs.

âIf you look at me like that for any more than two more seconds Iâm walking out of here and Iâll keep walking till I reach America,â he said softly, and Jake grinned.

âFair enough. Youâve copped a bit of matchmaking, then.â

âJust a bit. The whole fairground had gone into *Wouldnât it be great?* mode.â

âWell, it would be great.â

âExcept I like my women self-contained, clever, cool and sassy.â

âSusieâs clever and sassy.â

âFour or nothing,â he said, and drained his beer. âIâm engaged to Marcia. Sheâll be here the day after tomorrow.â

Jake raised an eyebrow. Sussing him. And grinning. âFirst Iâve heard of it. But itâs no business of mine, mate,â he added, pushing himself to his size twenty feet. âI have two hundred more balloons to disperse before Iâm off duty. One more beer and Iâll let the whole lot go skyward. Which might not be such a bad thing, if I didnât have three womenfolk whoâd give me a hard time for the rest of my life. Theyâd probably make me blow up two hundred more.â

âMarcia would never give me a hard time over a balloon.â

âLucky you,â Jake said. âOr unlucky you. Depending on which way you want to look at it, but I sure as hell know what way Iâm looking at it. Iâll leave you to your very important phone call.â

âMyâ¦?â

âIf Marciaâs coming in two days, hadnât you better let her know?â Jake suggested. âIf youâre arming the battlements itâs always a good idea to let the armour know whatâs required.â

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What was it about this place? Heâd landed in some chaotic muddle of people who seemed to think they knew him because his name was Douglas. Who seemed to think they knew more about his life than he did.

Which was clearly ridiculous.

But Jake had said he needed to make a phone callâand Jake was right.

Calculation. Midday here. Eight at night there. Fine.

Marcia answered on the first ring. Still at her desk, then.

âHi,â she said warmly. âHowâs the valuation going?â

âIâm a bit distracted,â he told her. Heâd emerged from the hubbub of noise within the beer tent, heâd retreated to the side of the marquee but he could still see the colourful chaos that was the fair. âOur pumpkin just won a major prize.â

There was a momentâs silence. Thenâ¦ âWell, hooray for our pumpkin. Hamish, are you feeling well?â

âAre you absolutely imperatively busy at the moment?â

âIâm always absolutely imperatively busy.â

âAnd if you dropped everything and came hereâ¦â

âWhy would I do that?â

âThe widow,â he said, and his desperation must have sounded down the wire because there was laughter.

âOh, darling, I did wonder. Youâre the heir and sheâs the dowager. So thereâs a bit of matchmaking?â

âNot on our part. I meanâ¦she doesnât want it any more than I do. But the townspeople do, and itâd make it much easier to keep everything on a business footing if you appeared.â

There was a momentâs silence. He could imagine her scrolling down the screen of her electronic diary, juggling appointments. Figuring out imperatives.

âI can spare you three days,â she said at last. âThereâs a financial review in Hong Kong starting next Friday I was tempted to attend. Hong Kongâs almost your time zone so I could get over jet-lag with you. I have no intention of being in Hong Kong if my

mindâs not totally focussed. Thereâs some heavy stuff going down. Oil futures. It could be really big.â

âSo that meansâ¦â

âIâll be with you Monday your time. Iâll fly out again on Thursday. Will that solve your problems?â

He stared around him. Oil futures in Hong Kong.

One of Jakeâs twinsâAlice?âwas walking toward him carrying a hot dog. She was leaving a trail of ketchup in her wake. She was beaming and holding it out to him as if it was a truly amazing gift.

Marcia here?

She had to come. He needed grounding. Fast.

âThatâll be great,â he said weakly.

âIâll let you know the arrangements. Is there anything else you need now? Iâm in a rush.â

âNo.â

âThen âbye.â Click.

âMarciaâs coming,â he told Alice as he accepted her hot dog, and she gave him a dubious smile.

âIs Marcia nice?â

âVery nice.â

âDoes she like hot dogs?â

âI guess.â

âMy Aunty Susie says you have to come,â she said. âThe wood choppingâs about to start and the laird always has first chop.â

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âHeâs a bit of all right.â

The woodchopping had seemed just what Hamish had needed. His hands were still a bit sore from digging but he put that aside. The sight of logs, waiting to be chopped, meant that he could vent his spleen in a way that didnât hurt anyone (except himâpity about the blisters!), didnât involve so much alcohol that heâd regret it the next day and got him away from Susie.

The logs were propped as posts. The woodchoppers were given a truly excellent axe and told to go to it. Hamish did his first ceremonial chop, then watched the champion woodchoppers

with something akin to envy. While he watched the woodchoppers, the inhabitants of Dolphin Bay were watching him, talking about him, clapping him on the backâand looking sideways at Susie.

Things were starting to get desperate. His blisters hurtâbut would a real earl be deflected by a few blisters? Of course not.

As the novice events started, he stripped to the waist and proceeded to chop.

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âThereâs something about a man in a kilt and nothing else,â Kirsty murmured, and nudged her sister. âOoh-er. A fine figure of a man, our new laird.â

âHeâs not our new laird,â Susie retorted, a trifle breathlessly. âA new laird wouldnât sell his castle and run.â

âHe hasnât sold it yet. Thereâs many a slipâ¦â

âCut it out, Kirsty.â

âSusie, heâs gorgeous.â

âKirsty, heâs engaged to be married.â

âSo you have noticed heâs gorgeous.â

âIâd have to be blind not to notice heâs gorgeous.â

The logs had to be chopped into four. The way it was done was to chop a chunk out, ram a plank into the chunk, stand on the plank and lop the top off. Then lower the plank and start again with a lower chunk. Hamish was on his second level. Chunks of wood were flying everywhereâthere was more enthusiasm than science in his technique. His body was glistening with sweat.

âKilts are yummy,â Kirsty said thoughtfully. âI wonder if Jakeâd wear one.â

âIâm yummy enough without a kilt.â Jake had come up behind them, and now he put his arms round his wife and hugged. âHow do you improve on just plain irresistible?â

âI liked you better when you were four feet taller,â Susie told him, eyeing her brother-in-law with disfavour. âAnd I donât know how it is but the red nose just doesnât cut it.â

âIt turns Kirsty on, though,â Jake said smugly, and Kirsty answered by pulling his plastic nose back to the full length of its elastic, holding it thoughtfully for a moment and then letting it go.

âYep, I like it better on,â she said, and turned back to her sister. âNow, where were we?â

âHey.â Jake clutched his nose in pain and Susie giggled. But there was a part of herâ¦

There was a part of her that was really, really jealous of her sister and her husband, she decided. Sheâd met and fallen for Rory, but sheâd had him for such a short time and then heâd been gone. His loss still had the power to hurt so much that she almost couldnât bear it. The sight of her sister and her husband so happyâ¦

Her eyes turned involuntarily back to Hamish. Hamish smashing through his third the level of wood. Hamish concentrating every ounce of energy in getting the log through, pitting his strength against the wood.

She thought of how heâd been yesterday morning, digging her path with just such energy. What was driving him?

What was this Marcia like?

It wasnât her business.

âIâm going home,â she said abruptly. âHarrietâs over under the trees with Rosie and Pup. Iâll go and collect them. I think itâd be better if I took Pup home now and settled her into her new home before dinner. Even if that home is temporary,â she added in an undertone but Kirsty heard and winced.

âSusie, do you mind? About the puppy?â

âI love Pup.â She hugged her sister.

âBut Hamishâ¦do you mind that heâs taking over?â

âWellâ¦â She shrugged. âI canât not mind, but it doesnât make sense to care too much.â

âIf you two got onâ¦â

âWe do get on. And no matter how much better we got on, heâd still sell the castle. Itâs the only sensible thing to do. Can you give him a ride home?â

âSure,â Jake told her. âIf you really need to go.â

âI really need to go.â

Â

He won.

Hamish stood over his four pieces of chopped logs and gasped until he got his breath back. This was fantastic. Much better than

any gym workout. He was standing bare backed, clad only in his kilt and footwear, the sun burning on his skin, the wash of the sea the background roar to the applause of the crowd. His hands were a bit painfulâactually, very painfulâbut what was a bit of pain? It felt like heâd been transformed into another place, another time. Another life.

Heâd won.

He turned to where Susie had been standing, and she wasnât there.

âWhereâ¦?â he started, and Jake came toward him and wrung his hand.

âWell done, mate.â

âOuch,â Hamish muttered, and hauled his hand back. âWhereâs Susie?â

âGone home.â

Right. Suddenly his hands were really, really painful.

This was dumbâbut it didnât feel fantastic any more.

Â

Hamish didnât come home for dinner and Susie didnât care. She didnât, she didnât, she didnât. Sheâd eaten far too much rubbish at the fair to worry about dinnerâa piece of the inevitable toast was fine. She fed the puppy the mix Adamâs mother had thoughtfully packed. She popped her to sleep in the wet room, and then as the puppy complained she carted her back to the kitchen, sat in the rocker in front of the fire and cuddled her.

âIâm calling you Taffy,â she said. âI know I had sixty-three other suggestions but they canât tell me what to call my very own puppy.â

Taffy looked up at her in sleepy agreement, curled into her lap and proceeded to go to sleep.

Susie rocked on.

âMe and a puppy and a baby,â she whispered. âI have a houseful.â

âWhere will I go?â she whispered back. âWhere will I take my little family?â

Sheâd go back to the house sheâd shared with Rory. Of course. That was the best thing to do. The simplest.

But the thought of going back to the house sheâd shared with Roryâ¦

âItâll be empty, Taf,â she told the puppy, popping her down onto a cushion by the fire. âEven with you. Itâs a gorgeous house on the coast. It looks out over the ocean. Itâs really wild. Rory worked from home and it was great with the two of us there butâ¦but Iâm not sure you and Rosie are going to be good enough company.â

As if in answer to her question, Taffy said nothing at all.

Susie rocked on. Sheâd lit the range more for company than because she needed its warmth, but the gentle crackle and hiss of burning logs was comforting.

Not comforting enough.

âI have to go home.â

âIsnât talking to yourself the first sign of madness?â

She jumped close on a foot. When she came down to earth she was breathlessâand cross.

âWhat do you think youâre doing?â

âComing home,â Hamish said and it was so much an echo of what sheâd been thinking that she almost jumped again.

âYou scared me.â

âIâm sorry.â

âItâs your kitchen,â she said, but she sounded defensive. She took a grip and tried for a lighter note. âYouâve had supper?â

But she was still flustered. He didnât look nearly as together as heâd looked that morning. He was still in his kilt but heâd chopped wood; heâd been drinking beer with the men; heâd joined the tug-of-war teams. He looked dishevelled and tired and frayed, like a Scottish lord coming home after a hard day at battle.

âYouâve got a splodge of toffee apple on your cheek,â she managed, a trifle breathlessly, and he wiped it away with the back of his hand and grinned.

âIâve had a very good time.â

âNot like Manhattan, huh?â

âNot the least like Manhattan. Iâve never had a day like this in my life.â

âDo you want supper?â

âAre you kidding?â He was standing in the doorway looking big and tousled. His long socks were down at his ankles, his legs were bare and there were grass stains on his kilt. And his hair

had hay in it. He lookedâ¦he lookedâ¦

Cut it out, she told herself desperately. Donât look!

âIâve been judging the cooking,â he told her, still with that grin that had her heart doing those crazy somersaulting things she didnât understand at all. âThey made me honorary adjudicator, which means Iâve tasted scones, plum cakes, sponge cakesâ¦you name it, Iâve tasted it. Some of it was truly excellent.â

âWhat makes you a judge?â

âItâs the kilt,â he told her wisely. âAnyone wearing a kilt like this has to know a lot about cooking. A lot about everything, really. Thatâs why they have the House of Lords in England.â

âSorry?â

âIf youâre a lord then you get to be an automatic Member of Parliament,â he told her. âI read it somewhere. I havenât figured out whether it applies to me or not, but I guess inheriting earldomship must make me wise in some respects.â

âLike in judging scones.â

âThatâd be it,â he told her, and all of a sudden they were grinning at each other like fools. The atmosphere had changed and it was somehowâ¦

Different.

She hadnât felt like this since Rory had died, she thought, and suddenly she felt breathless. Traitorish?

No. Free. It was like a great grey cloud, which had settled on top of her for the last two years, had lifted and she feltâ¦extraordinary.

âYou donât mind that Marciaâs coming?â he said, and she caught herself and forced her stupid, floating mind back to earth with a snap.

âOf course I donât. This is your house.â

âI should have told you.â

âThere was no need. Thereâs plenty of room. And as I said, I can always move out.â

âI donât want you to move outâ¦yet.â

Good. Great. She thought about it and wondered if she was being entirely sensible.

âI need to go,â she said a trifle uncertainly, rising and moving toward the door.

âTo America?â

âNot tonight.â She managed a smile but the frisson of something different was still in the air and she felt strange. This was crazy. This man was engaged to someone called Marcia and sheâd have nothing to do with him after she left here. But todayâ¦ Today heâd made her smile and heâd made everyone here smile, too. She was under no illusions as to how sad a day it would have been for everyone if Hamish hadnât been here, but heâd bounced around the fair having fun, charming old ladies, eating too many scones and toffee apples, looking fabulous in his kilt. Heâd given the locals something to talk about, something to smile over, and even when he left in a few weeks, even though heâd sell the castle, today had been a gift.

âThank you,â she said simply.

âThank you?â

âFor today. Everyone loved having a laird for the day.â

âIt was my pleasure.â

âReally?â

âIt was,â he said.

And there it was again. Bang. Like in the comics, she thought a little bit helplessly. Wham, bang, zing, splat.

âGood night, my lord,â she said simply, and he put out a hand and took hers. And winced.

The gesture had been a friendly good-night touch, but as she took his hand in hers and felt its warmth, touched his strength, she also felt something else.

âOuch,â she said, turning his palm over. And then she saw his palm and she repeated the word with feeling. *âOuch!â*

âIt is a bit,â he confessed, but she was no longer listening.

âOh, Hamish, your hands. You dope. You blistered them with digging and then to use the axeâ¦â

âWe earls arenât wusses.â

âYou earls are dopes,â she told him. âI might have known. Angus was just like you. You know, we had to dress his oxygen canister up in tartan so he could go to his last fair without feeling like a wuss.â

âI donât have an oxygen cylinder,â he said, startled, and she shook her head in disgust.

âNot for want of trying. Hamish, these are awful.â

âDonât say that,â she said uneasily. âIâve been trying to

ignore them all day.â

âRight. Ignoring them why? Waiting for your hands to drop off?â

âMy hands are not going to drop off.â

âThereâs ten blisters on this hand,â she said, hauling it closer to get a better look. âAnd thereâs a splinter in this one. And another. You great dope. Iâll ring Kirsty.â

âKirsty?â

âMy sister,â she said, exasperated. âThis needs medical attention.â

âIâll wash it,â he said, as if granting an enormous concession. âThatâll fix it.â

âIt wonât fix it.â

âIf you tell me how bad it is one more time, Iâll cry,â he said, like it was a huge threat, and she blinked and stared up at him in astonishment.

âReally?â

âUmâ¦no.â

âI wouldnât blame you if you did.â

âI wonât. I have an aversion to the pastime.â

âWell, donât stick near me, then,â she told him. âI cry all the time. Just looking at these makes me teary. You great hulking hero.â

âHero?â

âAxing away with all of these.â She was examining each blister, searching for more splinters, and the thought of him chopping wood, doing it to make the old ladies smileâ¦ Thatâs why heâd done it, she thought. Sheâd thought heâd done it because it had seemed fun but now, looking at these hands, she thought heâd done it because thatâs what sheâd asked him to do. Create a diversion from Angusâs death. Give the locals something else to think about it. Heâd eaten scones, heâd chopped wood, heâd placed every eye on him and heâd made people smile.

âPlease, donât cry.â He sounded so scared that she stared up at him in even more bewilderment. His face was set, and he was backing away. But she had hold of his hand and she wasnât letting him go anywhere. He was a dope but he was a great, gorgeous dope and heâd done this because sheâd asked him to.

Thereforeâat great personal sacrificeâsheâd choke back tears and be businesslike.

âIâm not crying,â she said, trying to sound exasperated and not emotional. âSit.â

âSit?â

âIâll clean them and Iâll pull the splinters out. And then Iâll put on iodine and weâll see how much of a man you are. You donât cry, huh? Iodine on these will be a real truth test. Iodine would make an onion howl all by itself.â

So he sat in the old rocking chair in front of the range, his free hand soaking in a bowl of soapy water sheâd rested on his kilted knees while she carefully examined each blister, cleaned it, lifted out tiny shards of wood with a pair of tweezersâand then anointed each one with iodine.

âYou should have a bullet to bite on,â she told him, and he looked down at her mop of auburn curls and thought he wasnât even near yelling. He was hardly thinking about pain.

She was intent on his hand. She was soâ¦simple, he thought, but maybe that wasnât the word. Sheâd changed from the clothes sheâd worn at the fair. Now she was wearing a pair of shorts and a faded T-shirt that was a little too tight. Her legs and her feet were bare. She was wearing no makeup. Her hair was falling forward, stopping him seeing what she was doing with his hand but at the same time distracting him nicely.

She smelt of some citrusy soap, he thought. Sheâd probably showered when sheâd come home from the fair. Maybe she and Rosie had bathed together and the vision of her bathing her baby was suddenlyâ¦.

Whew. It was just as well Marcia was coming, he thought. A man could get himself into dangerous territory here.

And why wouldnât a man want to?

The thought was so far out of left field that he blinked and almost pulled his hand away. She felt the tug and looked up in concern, all huge eyes and tousled hair andâ¦and Susie.

âIâm trying hard not to hurt you.â

âYouâre not hurting me.â

âTell me about your job,â she said, turning her attention back to the splinters as if it was important that she look at anything but him. As maybe it was.

âMy job?â

âYouâre a financier.â

âMmm.â

âYou love being a financier?â

âI guess.â Did he? He wasnât sure.

âIâve been trying to imagine why,â she told him. âI get such a kick out of planting something and watching it grow. Do you see schemes through to the end? Like if someone comes to you and says please can I build a bulldozer factory, can I have some money, does it give you the same thrill? That those bulldozers would never have got built if it hadnât been for you?â

âUmâ¦maybe thatâs banking,â he said uneasily.

âSo you donât do any hands-on supplying of money for doing interesting stuff like building bulldozers.â

âNo.â

âSo what do you finance?â

âI guess most of my work is taken up with futures broking,â he told her.

âWhich isâ¦â

âFiguring out what money is going to be worth in the future and buying and selling on that basis.â

She tweaked out another sliver of wood. Thoughtful. âSo you buy and sell money. It seems a bit odd to me but if it makes you happyâ¦â

Did it make him happy? Heâd never thought about it. It seemed such an odd concept that he almost didnât understand the question.

The high-powered finance world was where heâd worked all his adult life. All he knew was wheeling and dealing, the adrenalin rush of vast fiscal deals, the knife edge of knowing it was his brains holding everything in place and if he slipped upâ¦

He thought about his motherâs reaction when heâd told her that heâd been made a full equity partner. For once she hadnât cried. Sheâd closed her eyes and when sheâd opened them things had changed.

âNow I can stop worrying,â sheâd said.

Full equity partner in one of Manhattanâs biggest brokerage firmsâ¦well, if that was what it had taken to stop the tears, then great. And he was good at his job. It had earned him a lot, and he had no time to think about anything else.

What else was there to think about but work?

The scent of Susieâs hair? That was all he could think about now. That and the feel of her fingers carefully working on his hands. Each blister was being tended with care. It was such a strange sensation. An intimate sensation.

Would Marcia ever tend his blisters?

How would he get blisters around Marcia? He wouldnât. His biggest risk was of repetitive strain injury caused by using his Blackberry too much.

A cold damp something hit the edge of his bare leg and he hauled himself from his reverie and stared down.

Pup.

âWhoops,â Susie said, and laid Hamishâs hands carefully on his kilted knees and scooped up the pup. âThatâs good timing. Taffy, if youâve woken up, you go outside straight away. Hamish, donât touch anything. Iâll be back.â And she was gone, whisking the pup out into the gathering dusk.

Donât touch anything.

He sat for a bit, not thinking anything, letting his mind go blank. The sensation was almost extraordinary. When had he last done this?

Simplyâ¦stopped.

There was always something to do. Always. Reports to read, e-mail to check, constant analysis. If he didnât keep up then others would get ahead or things could slip by him and, hell, what was the use of being in the heap if you werenât on top?

His laptop was up in his bedroom. Heâd connected briefly that morning, checking things were OK. He should go up now and seeâ¦

It was seven at night. Three in the morning New York time. Not a lot was happening over there right now.

The Japanese market would be online, he decided. The yen had been looking pretty shaky when heâd left. It wouldnât hurt to stay online for a bit and get the feel forâ¦

Susie was out in the garden. With Taffy.

From where he sat he could hear the sea. He could smell the sea.

Sheâd told him to stay, so he did, sort of. He walked to the kitchen door and watched while she introduced Taffy to the lawn and explained what was required.

As if the dog could understand.

âThereâs no hurry,â she was saying. âI understand itâs all a bit strange and new, and thereâs even more strange and new to come, but we can take our time. Me and Rose will be the constants wherever you are, and weâll always be able to find you a patch of grass. Thereâs not a lot else you need to worry about.â

What about the Dow Jones? Hamish thought, glancing at his watch and wondering what the financial markets had done in the past ten hours. He always needed to worry about the Dow Jones.

But maybe not now. Maybe worrying about financial indices here wasâ¦ridiculous.

Susie was kneeling on the grass. The dopy pup had rolled over onto her back, and Susie was scratching her tummy. She wriggled in delight, her ungainly body squirming with ecstasy on the still sun-warmed ground.

How was she going to cope? Hamish thought. With a baby. With a puppy. She had a lot to worry about. She should be worrying about it right now!

She wasnât worrying. She lay on the grass herself and the puppy climbed on top of her. The last flickers of light from the tangerine sunset were soft on her face. She was giggling as the puppy tried to lick her cheek. From behind he could hear Rose chirping as she woke from what he presumed was a very late afternoon nap. Susie would never get her daughter to sleep tonight.

But she didnât care, he thought. She had no sense of order. He remembered his mother if dinner was five minutes late. Sheâd be almost apoplectic with anxiety.

He thought of Marcia if things didnât run to plan. What would Marcia do if he gave her a puppy?

Marcia would give the puppy right back. And as for a babyâ¦

Marcia letting a baby having an afternoon nap at this hour? Marcia having a baby?

The idea was so ridiculous that he grinned and Susie looked over and saw him grinning and said, âWhat?â

âWhat yourself?â

âYouâre laughing at me.â

âIâm laughing at your puppy. Thereâs a difference. Rose is awake.â

âGoody.â She scrambled to her feet, put the puppy down and made to go indoors. âShe went to sleep on the way home and wouldnât wake up. Sheâll be so hungry. I almost woke her but then I remembered thereâs an English comedy show I like on TV late tonight, and itâs the best fun watching it with Rose.â

Then as he blinked, trying to reconcile late-night comedy and a fourteen-month-old toddler, she hesitated. As sheâd started toward the door Taffy had followed.

âYou havenât done what you need to do,â she told the puppy, and pointed to the grass. âDuty first.â

The puppy looked up at her new mistress with adoration, and wagged her tail.

âStay here with her while I fetch Rose,â Susie ordered Hamish, and he nodded and put a foot out to stop Taffy following her mistress.

Taffy sat down and howled.

They both looked at Taffy. Taffy looked at both of them, opened her jaws and howled even longer.

âWhoops,â Susie said. âWhat have I let myself in for?â

âGive her back,â Hamish told her.

âWhat?â

âYou donât have to keep her.â

She snatched Taffy up and glared. âWhat a thing to say. Donât listen, sweetheart. Youâre mine. Weâre a family. I donât mind the odd howl. Itâs an excellent howl and itâs all your very own. I wonder if youâll like my TV programme, too.â

This was seriously weird. There were all sorts of things happening inside Hamish that he had no idea what to do with.

âYou canât be a family to thatâ¦that.â

âThat gorgeous pup? I can be a family with whoever I want,â she snapped, hauling herself up to her full five feet four inches and glaring. âTaffy needs me out here. Can you fetch Rose?â

âWhat, get her from her cot?â

âThatâs the plan.â

âJust walk in and pick her up?â

âYou earls have great courage,â she said, obviously trying not to sound sarcastic. âIf you pick her up under the armpits and close your palms, it wonât even hurt your blisters.â

It wasnât his blisters he was afraid of. âI canât pick up a baby.â

âDonât be ridiculous. Get in there.â

âWoof,â said Taffy.

He stared at the pair of them and they stared back, challenging.

He could do this. Right. *You earls have great courageâ¦*

Right.

He strode into the house, followed the sound of Rosieâs increased indignation and pushed open the door to Susieâs and Rosieâs shared bedroom. And paused in astonishment.

The bed was vast, a great four-poster with mounds of eider-downs and more mounds of cushions. There were pinks and purples and almost crimsons and gold. It was an amazing bed.

And the wallsâ¦

Deirdreâs kitsch ornaments had been taken down, and Susie had covered the walls with printsânot expensive artwork but prints sheâd obviously ordered because they appealed.

There were all sorts of prints.

Tree ferns taken from strange angles. Waterfalls. Rock formations. That was one wall.

Another wall was the seaâvast curling waves, surfers doing all sorts of incredible twisting turns, shots of foam, a single rock pool, a tiny minnow against a vast pier pileâ¦

The third was people. Grins. People smiling. These werenât people she knew. Ancient Tibetan grandmothers with gap-toothed grins. Old men smiling at each other in friendship. A group of kids in Scout uniform, smiling in unison.

And the last wall was photographs blown up. Susie as a kid, he thought, looking at twins cavorting on a beach. Photographs of a man who was obviously Rory. A couple in love. He looked at them smiling at each other, and felt a twist ofâ¦

No. Donât look. You donât need to feel like this.

It was dumb to put such photographs up, he thought. This was as kitsch as Deirdreâs efforts.

But then he thought, No, itâs not. He thought of his apartment back in Manhattan, and Marciaâs, planned by the same minimalist decorator whoâd recoil in horror if she saw this. But this sort of worked. It was a huge collage of life, of living, of all Susie held dear.

An indignant yell brought him back to earth. In the centre of the room was that which Susie held dearest. The toddler was

beaming as she saw sheâd caught his attention. She was holding her hands out and saying, âUp.â

âHi,â he said weakly, and she bounced and grinned and held her hands higher.

âUp, up, up.â

He could do this. He put his hands under her arms and gingerly raised her.

She giggled and pointed to the bed. âDappy,â she said.

Dappy. He thought about it. Then he realised what she meant. Um, no.

He made to carry herâholding her at armâs lengthâout the door, out to her mother, but her yell became urgent. He had her agenda wrong.

âDappy, dappy, dappy.â

You earls have great courage.

âWhere are your diapers?â he asked, and she pointed an imperious finger to the pile on a side table. Under the Tibetan grandmas.

âDappy.â

OK. He set Rose down on the floor but she yelled in indignation. Her routine was obviously to be followed to the letter.

âBed,â she said, and pointed.

âGive me a break,â he said weakly, but he was a man under orders. He tossed a diaper across to the bed, then lifted Rose and set her down on the eiderdown. She almost disappeared in its vastness.

She giggled and kicked her feet, squirming away from him and burrowing under the cushions. This was obviously a game, played whenever she woke up.

The bed smelt like Susie.

The room smelt like Susie.

Rose lifted a cushion, grinned at him, chortled and pulled the pillow back over her head again. He considered, then put a finger on the small of her back and tickled.

Shrieks of laughter and she squirmed deeper. Right under the quilt.

He put his head under the quilt and said, âBoo.â

âDappy,â she said, and pushed the quilt away, lay flat and waited. âBooâ was obviously the magic word.

And he performed magic as well. Hamish Douglas, corporate financier, ninth Earl of Loganaich, successfully changed a diaper.

âLike climbing Annapurna One,â he told himself, setting Rose on the floor, carrying the used diaper into the bathroom in triumph and thinking of the worldâs second most difficult climb. âA soggy diaper. A soiled diaper represents Everest.â

Then as Rose looked thoughtful he tossed the diaper into the wastebin and dived on the toddler to take her out to her mother before she could send him up his second mountain.

He wasnât ready for Everest yet.

Â

Susie was still waiting for Taffy to perform. She was sitting on a garden seat, watching the dark settle over the garden, simplyâ¦waiting.

Hamish delivered her daughter, Rose squirmed down onto the grass and she and Taffy proceeded to investigate each other.

âArenât you going to make her dinner?â Hamish asked, and Susie smiled down at her puppy and her daughter and shook her head.

âNo oneâs in a hurry.â

It was such a strange concept that Hamish blinked.

âYou want a seat?â Susie wriggled sideways, making room on the bench.

Why would he sit down? Just to sit?

âMaybe Iâll work on the path.â

âWith those hands? Are you out of your mind?â

âWe earls have great courage.â

âYou earls need a straitjacket if you work with hands like those. Just stop, Hamish. Rest.â

He sat. Gingerly. It felt weird.

âThank you for today,â she said gently, and he felt even more weird.

âWhyâ¦?â

âYouâve made today happy for a lot of people. Just by being here.â

âJust by exposing my knees?â

âA thing of beauty is a joy for ever,â she said serenely, and he choked.

âRight.â

âHonest, Hamish.â Her hand came out to touch his arm. Lightly resting. There was no pressure but the feel of her fingers on his arm was almost his undoing. That and the warmth of the night, the soft hush of the sea, the weird domesticity of pup and baby playing at their feetâ¦

âYou were wonderful,â she said, and suddenly she twisted so she could kiss him. Lightly. It was a kiss of thanks. No more than that. A feather kiss.

Exceptâ¦it wasnât.

People kissed all the time, Hamish thought. They kissed in greeting, and farewell, or as had just happened, to say thank you. It meant nothing. There was no reason to think that a twenty-thousand-volt electric charge had just cut off every other circuit in his body.

Why?

There was no reason, he thought, dazed.

Or was it because Susie was a thousand light years away from any other woman heâd ever dated? She was a thousand light years from Marcia. In her faded shorts and T-shirt and nothing else, nothing to attract, nothing at all, she smeltâ¦she feltâ¦

Soft and delicious and absolutely, imperatively desirable.

It was just the day, he thought, hauling back in shock and dazed wonder. It had been a day totally out of his experience, and he was floundering here because heâd never met anyone like this before, and there were probably thousands of women who were like this but heâd just never met them, and he was out of his comfort zone, andâ¦

âHey, Hamish, Iâm not planning on jumping you,â Susie said, and he jerked back to reality. To Susie staring at him with eyes that were bemusedâand maybe also a little hurt.

âI know. Itâs justâ¦Iâm engaged to Marcia.â

Maybe that had been the wrong thing to say.

âI know youâre engaged to Marcia,â she said with asperity. âYou really do think Iâm planning on jumping you. Just because Iâm a widow.â

âNo.â

âYou do,â she said, and there was no disguising the anger now. She rose and stood, glaring at him with her hands on her hips, vibrating with fury. âIf your colleague in the next office

said goodbye, have a good vacation, and kissed you, what would you have thought?â

âNothing.â Of course not. It was what had happened. âHey, Hamish is off on a vacation, can you believe that? âBye, Hamish, take care.â Kiss.

It meant nothing. But he had to stop thinking sideways. Susie was in temper-on mode.

âBut because Iâm a widow, everyone looks at me like Iâm encroaching. Like Iâm just planning how to get the next man into my bed. Like Iâm every married womanâs worst enemy. Even you. Itâs so unfair. I loved Rory like Iâve never loved anyone. Iâm not in the market for another relationship, and hauling Marcia over here just to protect yourselfâ¦ Donât think I donât realise what youâre doing, Hamish Douglas. There was no inkling from you that Marcia would be coming until everyone looked at us like a couple. Then you started looking like a rabbit caught in headlights. Itâs just so dumb. Dumb, dumb, dumb.â She swooped down and lifted Rose into her arms.

âCome on, sweetheart. Weâll go make you some dinner and leave his Lordship here in solitary splendour. In the knowledge that his virtue can remain intact for his precious Marcia. But know that even if there were a million Marciasâor do I mean if there werenât any?âthereâs no way Iâm interested in you, Hamish Douglas, Not the least little bit. Not one skerrick. You leave me as cold as a flat, dead fish.â

She turned and wheeled into the house. Hamish was left starting after her.

Taffy looked at up him, doubtful.

âIâd follow,â he told the pup. âIâm a flat, dead fish.â

Taffy hesitated a bit more but then as Hamish remained unmoving she obviously decided that maybe Hamish was right. Flat, dead fish were a bit unappetising.

He followed Susie.

There was absolute silence. Even the hush of the sea was fading.

Nothing.

A flat, dead fish.

He should go check his e-mail. He shouldâ

There was a groan from the house and Susieâs head appeared at the kitchen window.

âThanks for sending Taffy inside,â she snapped. âSheâs done her business in the hallway. Over to you, your Lordship.â

Great. He rose. *We earls have great courage.*

Even flat, dead fish had their uses.

CHAPTER SEVEN

WHAT followed were a couple of very strained days. Susie and Hamish skirted each other with extreme caution.

They spent the mornings at the beachâwell, why wouldnât they as the beach was there and gorgeous? Taffy loved it. Rose loved it. Hamish loved it. He admitted that to himself but, hell, it was a strain. Susie was a small indignant puff of offence and she treated the beach as if theyâd put a fence down the middle, with strictly segregated His and Hers zones. When he offered to take care of Rose to give her time to swim she accepted graciouslyâas if she was granting him a favourâbut she flounced out to sea and flounced back, and ignored him in the interim.

âI didnât mean to offend you,â he told her.

âYou didnât offend me. You merely implied I saw you as husband material. As nothing could be further from the truth, I believe we need to keep things formal.â

Right. Formal.

By the time Marcia arrived on Monday evening he was almost relieved. Anything to break the formality.

Marcia arrived with Jake. Jake had gone up to Sydney for a one-day pain management conference, and as the times fitted perfectly, heâd offered to collect Marcia from the airport and bring her down. So at eight on Monday night Hamish strolled out to the castle forecourt to greet his fiancÃ©e.

âHi, sweetheart,â he said as she emerged from Jakeâs truck. He hugged her elegantly suited body close and kissed herâso deeply that he caught her by surprise. When the kiss ended she pulled back and looked astonished.

âWow,â she said, touching her lips like they were bruised. âItâs only been a few days.â

âIâve missed you.â

âIs the widow watching?â

The widow. It took him a minute to catch that but realised, of course, Marcia would think he was playing for an audience. Since heâd impliedâ¦

âHave you warned Marcia about our Susie?â Jake asked, sounding interested, and Hamish grimaced.

âI havenât told Marcia anything.â

âOnly that the whole place is expecting you to marry her,â Marcia said smoothly. âYou might as well say it like it is, sweetheart. Keep things out in the open so thereâs no misunderstanding.â

âNo misunderstanding,â Jake said blankly. âRight.â

âUmâ¦good trip?â Hamish said, feeling desperate. âHave you two found lots to talk about?â

âI slept all the way,â Marcia said. She turned to Jake and gave him her loveliest smile, which was only slightly patronising. âThank you so much. Iâm afraid I was very boring.â

âNot at all,â Jake told her politely. âIâll leave you to your Hamish, then, shall I?â

âThat would be kind.â Peasantry dismissed.

âRight, then,â Jake said, and with a wry grin he folded his long body back into the driverâs seat of his battered Land Cruiser, gave a salute of acknowledgement and left.

âThat was a bit brusque,â Hamish said, frowning as Jake backed out of the forecourt. âDid you two not find anything to talk about at all?â

âHonestly, darling, heâs a family doctor. I donât even have any bunions to talk about.â

âI guess not.â

Marcia was out of her territory, he thought, suppressing irritation. She wasnât normally this brittle. Maybe she was just better among her own kind.

He was her kind, he remembered. This was the woman he intended marrying. He loved her cool, sophisticated humour. She was so intelligentâ¦

âSo whereâs the widow?â she asked.

âInside. Iâll take you to meet her.â

But she hung back, taking a moment to absorb the whole moonlit scene, the fairy-tale castle, the mountains behind, the fabulous coastline.

âThis will sell for a mint,â she breathed. âOh, Hamish, imagine this in *Vogue Traveller*. Your own little Scottish castle without all those horrid fogs and bogs and midges of Scotland.â

âThereâs nothing wrong with Scotland,â he said, and startled himself by how fervent he sounded.

âYouâve never been to Scotland.â

âNo, but Iâm a direct descendantâ¦â

She gave a peal of laughter and tucked her hand into his arm. âYouâve become the Lord of Loganaich,â she said affectionately. âMy very own earl, defending the land of his forebears. Any minute now youâll be up on the turrets playing your bagpipes.â

He grinned, relaxing a little. âI do wear a mean kilt.â

âThis I have to see.â

âYou need to meet Susie first.â

âThe widow. OK, letâs get the scary part over and then get down to the fun part. This place sounded good on paper but in realityâ¦ Wow! Letâs figure what this pile is really worth!â

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The meeting between Susie and Marcia was not an unqualified success. Susie was in the kitchen, cleaning up. She greeted Marcia with cautious courtesy. Marcia responded in kindâwhile clinging to Hamishâs arm with proprietorial affectionâand then Susie excused herself.

âThereâs steak in the fridge, Hamish, if Marciaâs hungry. Iâd cook it butââ

âBut I do a better steak than you do,â Hamish told her, smiling encouragingly. Wishing she didnât look so tense. Wishing he hadnât told Marcia there was a problem.

Wishing Marcia wasnât clinging quite so close.

âIâll go to bed, then,â Susie said, and Marcia glanced at her watch, astonished.

âItâs only eight.â

âSusieâs recovering from injuries,â Hamish said, and then wished he hadnât said that as well, as Susie flashed him a look of anger.

âIâm not recovering from injuries. Iâm recovered from injuries.â

âYou limp,â Marcia pointed out, and Susie glowered a bit and limped her way past them.

âSo I do,â she agreed. âItâs my own little idiosyncrasy. But I like it. Iâm going to bed to read a good romance novel and I

donât intend to recover at all. Hamish, you need to show Marcia through the castle. Iâll bet sheâs interested in your inventory. And when youâve finishedâ¦ Marcia, could you let me know when this hotel assessorâs expected, as I need to organise myself to leave? Good night.â

Taffy was snoozing by the stove. Susie scooped her up, glared at the pair of them and left.

âHave I offended her?â Marcia asked, and Hamish sighed.

âI guessâ¦I mean, maybe it wasnât such a good idea to imply there was a problem.â

âWhat do you mean? Her limp? Itâs obvious. She canât expect me not to notice.â

That wasnât the problem heâd been talking about. âNever mind. Are you hungry?â

âActually, I ate on the way here and Iâm very tired. Maybe the widow has a good idea with early bed.â She snuggled back against him. âWhere are we sleeping?â

âIâve put you in the bedroom next to mine. Come and Iâll show you.â

âNot yours?â

âUm, no. It just seemsâ¦â

âA bit mean?â Marcia was struggling to understand. âHoney, if she really wants you, then the faster she comes to terms with reality the better.â

âItâs not like that. It justâ¦ Marcia, it seems like this is Susieâs home and Iâd like it to stay that way until we leave. I thinkâ¦separate bedrooms.â

She raised a cool eyebrow. âWell, thatâs fine with me. I have a date with my laptop. Iâve missed so much, trying to get here. There wonât be a romance novel for me in bed tonight.â

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Hamish slept late. Hours late by his standards. He always woke early in New York to find the latest on the Hang Seng before he went to work. As he was always behind his desk by seven, that meant he went to bed in the small hours and he woke in the small hours. He couldnât remember a time when heâd fallen into bed at ten and slept for more than eight hours.

But hereâ¦ It was the silence of the place, he thought, or that

there was no desk waiting and Jodie had cancelled his imperatives.

He woke and it was already seven-thirty. He lay lazily back on his mound of satin pillows and watched the early morning sunbeams flicker through the floating dreamcatcher Deirdre had hung at the window. Jodie had hung a dreamcatcher on the window of his outer office back in Manhattan. Heâd asked her what it was and sheâd explained the ludicrous concept in detail.

Susie might not think it ludicrous, he thought. Jodie hadnât. Deirdre obviously hadnât.

He needed Marcia to set him right. Sheâd be up by now. He should go find her.

But his thoughts kept wandering, snagging different ideas like the dreamcatcher was designed to do.

Where was Jodie was right now? he wondered. Was she making choir stalls with her beloved Nick? Heâd miss his secretary when he went back.

When he went back. When he left here.

When he left Susie.

Susie was leaving first.

Maybe he could keep in touch with Susie, he thought. Just to check that she was OK. Heâd tell Kirsty and Jake that heâd keep an eye on her.

Sheâd throw such an offer back in his face, he decided. She didnât need anyone to take care of her.

But he rejected that, too. Of course she needed someone. She thought she was strong enough to care for a baby and a dog and a career. She was planning on working as a landscape gardener again, but anyone could see she had physical problems. Her legs would never hold her up.

He couldâ¦ He couldâ¦

He could do nothing. It was none of his business.

More lying on his satin pillows and thinking. He was head of the clan, he thought. Lord of Loganaich. Laird. It behoved him to care forâ¦

For the relic?

The thought of Susie as a relic was so crazy he laughed and threw off his covers and headed for the shower. He was being dumb. Heâd go and find Marcia and show her this crazy castle from stem to stern. Theyâd smile about how ridiculous it was,

theyâd talk about practicalities and then sheâd bring him up to speed on how the office was coping without him. Marcia was just what he needed.

Right.

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Marcia was already in the kitchen. As were Susie and Rose and Taffy. Quite a party. Hamish opened the door and they all turned toward him and glared.

Uh-oh.

A more cowardly man would have retreated. There were obviously issues abroad here. Womenâs issues?

âWe have,â Susie said cautiously, as if she wasnât sure she could trust her voice, âno soy milk. We have a case of bananas but theyâre the wrong sort of fruit. Cumquats make the wrong sort of juice and the oranges arenât ripe yet. And Marcia doesnât like the idea of eating strawberries that have been lying on mulch. If youâd warned me Marcia was on a low-carb diet I could have got things in.â

âLow carbâs easy,â he said, cautious as Susie and with a wary look at his beloved. âI mean, steakâs low carb.â

âSteak for breakfast?â Marcia shook her head in disbelief. âHonestly, Hamish, just lend me your car keys and Iâll go fetch what I need from the supermarket.â

âItâs five miles down the road and it doesnât open until nine,â Hamish said. âCanât you have toast?â

âThe locals eat porridge,â Susie said, lifting a pot onto the range. âI can recommend it.â

âItâs hardly low carb,â Marcia retorted.

âHey, Marcia, itâs hardly a hotel yet,â Hamish said uneasily. âIt wouldnât hurt to break your diet for a morning.â

âIâd prefer not to break my diet,â Marcia said, but she smiled, ready to be accommodating. âItâs OK, guys. Iâm not hungry.â

âYouâre too thin,â Susie muttered.

âA woman can never be too thin.â

âYeah, youâd know,â Susie muttered, and banged her pan on the range. Then she took a grip. âSorry. That sort of just came out. I was too thin for a while and itâs scary.â

âI have no intention of heading down the eating disorder road,â Marcia said. âI have too much control.â

âIâm sure you have,â Susie said, but the eyes she turned on Hamish were suddenly bleak. âIâve made a big pot of porridge. Do you want some?â

âYes, please.â It was the least a man could do in the circumstances, he thought, but then he saw the sudden gleam behind Susieâs eyes and thought, Uh-oh.

âA porridge-eating laird,â she said thoughtfully. âFinally.â

âIâm back on toast tomorrow.â

âIâm sure you are.â There was definitely laughter there now. She was like a chameleon, he thought. Swinging from happy to sad and back again.

He didnât want her to be sad. Had she been too thin? When? After Roryâs death? Hell, he hated to think of what sheâd been through.

âHave you been working up in your bedroom?â Marcia asked, and he blinked.

âUmâ¦yeah.â

âDid you see the Euro dropped almost two cents against the greenback overnight?â

âAnd Taffy slept till dawn without howling once,â Susie added. âIt has indeed been a busy night.â

He couldnât keep up with this conversation. He gave up and sat, and Susie placed a bowl of porridge in front of him. He ladled honey on top, and cream, and he sprinkled it with cinnamon, as heâd seen Susie do with hers every morning, while Marcia looked on with distaste.

âDonât look,â he told her. âHave a coffee.â

âAt least thereâs a decent coffee-maker,â she conceded. âThough where you get good beansâ¦you know, thatâll drive down the price of this place as a hotel. You wonât be able to source reasonable foodstuffs.â

âIâm eating my porridge out in the garden,â Susie announced, a little too loudly. She lifted Roseâs high chairâwith Rose in itâand hoisted it toward the door.

âLet me help,â Hamish said, getting to his feet, but Susie was already outside.

âThanks, but Iâm fine on my own.â

âYou will let me help you down to the beach later on?â

She hesitated, and he could see her reluctance to accept help warring with her huge desire to swim.

âThank you,â she muttered. âThat would beâ¦nice.â She carried Rose further out, then dived back for her porridge.

âSusieâ¦â Marcia started, but Susie was back out the door.

âI canât leave Rose in her high chair alone.â

âI just thought you might be interestedâ¦â

âIn what?â

âIâve been in touch with the hotel assessors,â she said. âTheyâll arrive tomorrow. Can you make yourself available?â

Susie hardly paused. She was carrying her bowl of porridge, walking out the door with Taffy following loyally behind.

âOf course,â she said with dignity over her shoulder. âI promised. And after that Iâll go home.â

Â

Marcia took her Blackberry to the beach. âHey, thereâs a signal here,â she announced, and was content. She lay in her gorgeous bikini and communed with her other world.

As he should, too, Hamish thought, but he was busy watching Susie. Heâd swum less than usual this morning, coming back to the towels to keep Marcia companyâbut Marcia didnât need company. She never did. She was going to make an excellent partner, he decided as he sat next to her beautifully salon-tanned body. She was gorgeous, she was clever and she was totally independent.

She was just what he needed.

Susie was at the other end of the beachâof course. She was sitting in the shallows with Rose. Rose was perched on her motherâs knees, kicking out at each approaching wave, as if by kicking it she could stop it coming.

Taffy was barking hysterically at incoming waves, barking until the wave was almost on her then putting her tail between her legs and scooting up the beach just in front of the white water. Then she barked in triumph as the wave retreatedâonly to have it all happen again.

Hamish discovered he was grinning as he watched them.

But they werenât perfect.

Marcia was perfect.

What was he about, making comparisons?

âIâll go over and give Susie a break from childminding so she can have a swim,â he told Marcia, and she raised her eyebrows in amused query.

âYou? Look after a baby?â

âI can change a diaper,â he said, almost defiantly, and her smile widened.

âIf I were you Iâd never put that on your curriculum vitae. Itâs not the sort of ability thatâll get you a job in our world.â

Our world. He looked down at her Blackberry. Right.

âDo you want help childminding?â she asked, and it was time for his brows to hike.

âYouâre kidding.â

She smiled. âYouâre right. Iâm kidding. But if itâs something I need to do for a smooth transitionâ¦â

Sheâd do whatever it took to build a solid financial future, he thought. Wise woman.

âGo back to your wheeling and dealing,â he told her. âBabysittingâs not an occupation I plan on doing any more in my life, but youâre right. By doing it now Iâm making things smoother for Susie.â

âNot for you?â

âOnly in thatâ¦â He paused. Only in that it made Susie happier? Only in that it let Susie have one of her last swims in this place? He couldnât think how to finish his sentence.

âGo do it, Nanny Douglas,â Marcia told him, deciding to be amused. âAnd be careful when you stand up. I donât want sand in my keypad.â

Then it was his turn to sit in the shallows and entertain Rose while Taffy barked and Susie swam. Not that Rose needed to be entertained. Sheâd happily kick waves for the rest of her life, he thought.

Were there waves where she was going?

He didnât know.

He couldnât care.

Â

Susie disappeared as soon as they got back from the beach, retreating to the bedroom with a couple of vast suitcases sheâd retrieved from the box room and a carton of garbage bags. They

hardly saw her for the rest of the day.

âIâm so pleased sheâs being sensible,â Marcia told him. âThere was hardly any need for me to come. I donât think sheâs the least bit interested in you.â

âNo.â

âYou know, it really is the most beautiful place,â she said. Theyâd finished a fairly strained dinnerâfish and chips that Hamish had gone into Dolphin Bay to fetch, and a bowl of steamed vegetables for Marciaâand now they were sitting on the balcony, looking out at the bay in the fading light. âIt seems a shame to sell it straight away.â

âWhat else would I do with it?â Hamish said shortly. Heâd thought this through. Sure, this was a financial windfall, and realistically he didnât need the interest that heâd get from its sale. Heâd thought that maybe he could leave Susie here as indefinite caretaker but heâd known instinctively that sheâd refuse such an offer. It was a dumb idea anyway. Itâd leave her in limbo, his indefinite pensioner. She needed to move on. âYou surely arenât suggesting we live here?â

âNo, but Iâve been thinking that doing some capital improvements before we put it on the market might get us a better price,â Marcia told him. âIâll need to talk to the assessor tomorrow butâ¦ Come and see what I mean.â

âWhatâ?â

âJust come and see. Why no oneâs thought of this before this is beyond me.â

She led the way downstairs out to Susieâs vegetable garden, with Hamish following feeling bemused. Marcia had only been here for twenty-four hours, yet she already seemed proprietorial. She was leading him though his very own castle.

He shouldnât mind. He didnât. It was justâ¦

It was just that this was Susieâs place, he thought, but that was dumb. But when he emerged to the twilight and saw Susieâs garden he stopped thinking his idea was dumb and decided that it was right. It certainly seemed Susieâs place. Her garden was fabulous.

He had no illusions as to whoâd done the work here. For the last twelve months, as Angusâs health had slowly deteriorated, Susie must have thrown her heart and soul into caring for this place. Her vegetable garden could feed a small army. If this was

turned into a hotel the chef would never have to go near a greengrocer.

But Marcia wasnât interested in the garden. She was striding purposefully toward the conservatory. She pushed open the doors and flicked the light, then swore as the light didnât work. It was dusk and the place was still lovelyâsmelling of ripening oranges and overripe cumquats and the rich loam that Susie had been using to pot seedlings. The lack of light made it seem more beautiful.

âThis is what I brought you to see,â Marcia said, in the same voice she used when she produced a contract that was hugely advantageous to the firmâand to her. âItâs fabulous.â

âIt is,â Hamish said, walking forward and touching the same branch of hanging cumquats Susie had touched the first day heâd met her. Was it his imagination or could he sense her here? This place seemed almost an extension of her.

âWe need to take the end wall out so we can get machinery in,â Marcia was saying, and he blinked.

âPardon?â

âItâs great. Canât you see it?â

âSee what?â

âThe view from the end wall is right down to the sea. The tourists this place will attract will spend most of their time right here.â

âWhy?â

âA swimming pool,â she said with exaggerated impatience. âI thought about it this morning while I was at the beach. The beach is lovely but most tourists donât want to spend much time there.â

âWhy not?â

âThe sand gets into your Blackberry, for one thing,â she said, getting even more exasperated. âHamish, when we went to Bermuda last year, did we spend any time at the beach?â

âWe were there at a conference.â

âExactly. We had things to do. There was a beach but did we use it?â

There had been a beach, Hamish remembered. He thought back to an intense four days of business dealings. He remembered watching the sun rise from his hotel room, watching the view, watching people stroll on the beachâ¦and

then fitting in a fast fifteen minutes in the hotel pool before breakfast.

âWeâre the clientele weâll attract,â Marcia said. âPeople who appreciate what luxury really is. Anyway, Iâm thinking we need to heave out every bit of kitsch before we put this place on the market. And Iâm also thinking that we should dig a pool into this building. Honestly, Hamish, buyers have no imagination. Did you see the potential of this place as a swimming pool?â

âNo.â

âThere you go, then,â she said triumphantly. âIâll talk it through with the assessor tomorrow but I think you should hold selling off a little longer while we transform this place.â She hesitated. âI donât suppose we could persuade the widow to stay as a transitional caretaker.â

âI suspect we donât have a hope.â

She shrugged. âWell, thereâs others. Maybe we need someone a bit more level-headed anyway.â There was a beep from her belt and she lifted her Blackberry and peered at the lit screen. âCharles,â she said in satisfaction. âHe has some figures I need. If youâll excuse me, darlingâ¦ Walk through to the end and see if Iâm right. A swimming pool and a bar with a view to die for. Our tourists wouldnât have to move. I suspect the pool could double our price.â

And she was off, leaving him to his thoughts.

His thoughtsâ¦

He didnât have any thoughts, he decided. He was a blank. He fingered his cumquat some more and thought it was a great smell. It was a great place.

A luxury swimming pool? Maybe theyâd have a few of these orange trees in tubs round the sideâ¦

âYouâd really chop down all Angusâs orange trees?â

Susieâs muted voice was so unexpected that his heart forgot to take a beat. He stilled, trying to think what to say, and she came out of the shadows and stood right before him. Still in the plain faded shorts and T-shirt he was starting to get to know. Still with bare feet. Her hair was tousled and there was a smudge of dirt on her forehead.

âI didnât know you were here,â he managed, when he got his breath back.

âIâve been planting out seedlings into bigger pots. I was

intending to plant them straight into the vegetable garden but now Iâm leaving Iâll need to find other homes for them. Am I supposed to apologise?â

He was still discomfited. âYou could have told us you were here.â

âI could have come out of the dark and said I heard every word? Thatâs what Iâm doing now. I didnât mean to eavesdrop but what Marcia was sayingâ¦it made me feelâ¦â She paused. âBut, of course, itâs none of my business.â

âNo.â There was no way to dress this up, he decided, shoving his sense of disquiet aside. If he was going to sell this place he couldnât be looking over his shoulder all the time, wondering what Susie was thinking.

âAngus was so proud of his oranges,â she said wistfully, and he braced himself.

âSomeone else will be proud of a swimming pool.â

âIt sounds like Marcia will be proud.â

âThatâs right. Though itâs a business proposition. Sheâll be pleased if it means we get a good price for this place.â

âButâ¦â She paused. âIf you sell the castle, doesnât the money go into trust?â

âIt does.â Heâd looked into this. It was a complex inheritance, where the castle was a part of the entailed estate to be handed down to the inheriting earl. Generation after generation. It had been made complex by the burning of the original castle, meaning the capital had been moved here. The trustees would allow sale, but the proceeds would return to the trust.

But heâd earn interest on a very sizeable sum.

âWill you and Marcia have children?â she asked. âTo inherit? â

âIâ¦â How to answer that? He thought about it and decided he didnât have to. âI have no idea.â

âItâs justâ¦would your son prefer to inherit a castle or a heap of depreciating money?â

âHell, Susieâ¦â

âBut thatâs easy, isnât it?â she said sadly. âThatâs the choice you made and youâve made it really fast.â

âWhat would I do with this place if I kept it?â

âYou could think laterally,â she said with sudden asperity. âInstead of thinking whatâs the best way to make money from this place. Youâre not exactly needy.â

âNo, butââ

âBut youâll chop down these gorgeous orange trees. Do you know, itâs five hundred miles to the nearest place you can grow oranges from here? The locals here eat Angusâs oranges all winter. We have the best vitamin C intake per capita of any place in the country.â

âGee,â he said blankly, and she glared at him in the dusk. He couldnât see the glare, he thought, but he could feel it.

âYou donât care.â

âSusie, we both need to move on.â

âI am moving on,â she said with irritation. âYouâre not moving anywhere, as far as I can see. Youâre taking your money and bolting back to your safe hole in Manhattan. What is it with you and money? Why is it so important?â

âMoneyâs important to everyone.â

âTo provide necessities, yes,â she snapped. âEven enough to buy the odd luxury when you feel inclined. But Marcia says what you earn is way out of that league.â

âMarcia has no rightââ

âAnd neither do I.â She turned her back on him, lifting a branch of cumquats, heavy with fruit. She started plucking the fruit from the loaded branch, making a pile on the bench beside her. âOK. Iâll butt out of whatâs not my business.â

âWhat are you doing?â

âIâm picking your cumquats,â she snapped again. âWhat does it look like?â

âWhat for?â They were hardly edible. Heâd tried one yesterday. They looked fabulous, like tiny mandarins, lush and filled with juice, but the first bite had seen him recoil.

âTheyâre great for marmalade.â

âYou canât cook.â

âI intend to learn,â she said with dignity. âIâm leaving here the day after tomorrow and Iâm taking some of Angusâs cumquat marmalade with me.â

âSo youâll learn and do it tomorrow.â

âWhy not?â

She was fearless, he thought. A vision of Susie down in the cove was suddenly in his head, a scarred, limping woman, diving full on into the white water and heading for the outer reaches of the cove. Her body strong and sure and determined.

Sheâd succeed in her landscaping business, he thought. Clients would be lucky to get her. She was soâ¦

Soâ¦

He picked a couple cumquats to add to her pile and her body grew stiffer. She had her back to himâhe was of no importance to her.

âThanks, but I can do this myself.â

âYou just said you canât cook marmalade.â

âNeither can you.â

âBut I have a connection to the Internet. I bet we could find a recipe.â

âSo youâll find a recipe,â she said, and then decided maybe she was being a bit grumpy. âThank you. Iâll do them tomorrow.â

âThe assessorâs coming tomorrow.â

âIâll do it after Iâve talked to him. Or he can talk to me while I stir the marmalade.â

âYou need to pack tomorrow.â

âIâm almost packed.â

âYou need to swim.â

That made her pause. She hesitated. âIâ¦â

âYou do want to swim on your last day?â

âOf course, butââ

âBut you also want to make marmalade. So letâs make it now.â

The stiffness of her back had lessened and she turned cautiously around. âCould we?â

âIâd imagine we need lots of sugar and lots of jars.â

âHow do you know?â

âWell, the jars are a given,â he said. âIâd guess we canât eat more than half a pint of marmalade tonight.â

âI suppose not. We will need jars.â

âAnd my Aunty Molly used to make jam,â he added. âSo I know we need almost as much sugar as fruit.â

âYou used to watch your Aunt Molly cook?â

âI did.â He sounded uncomfortableâhe knew he didâand he saw her hesitate as if sheâd ask more. She stared at him, searching his face in the dim light, looking forâ¦

He didnât know what she was looking for. And, whatever it was, he knew he didnât want her to find it.

Or he thought he didnât want her to find it.

This conversation was too deep for him. Way too deep. His thoughts were starting to become knotted, and untangling them was impossible. Chop them off and get on with it, he thought, suddenly savage, and he tugged a cumquat branch toward him and started plucking.

âIf weâre to finish before midnight, then we start now,â he said, and she waitedâand watchedâfor a moment longer before deciding to play along.

âRose didnât have an afternoon nap so sheâs out for the count,â she said. âSoâs Taffy. I guess if I go to bed, all Iâll do is dream of uprooted orange trees, so I might as well make marmalade.â

âSusieâ¦â

âI know. Thereâs nothing either of us can do about it.â She shrugged. âIâm being unfair. Itâs a very nice offer to teach me to make marmalade. I accept with pleasure. Do you think Marcia would like to help?â

CHAPTER EIGHT

MAKING marmalade was a tricky business. It took sugar, cumquats, jars, a recipe, concentrationâ¦

They had everything they needed. Deirdre had obviously decided the pantry stores needed to be filled just like a real castleâs would be in case of siegeâand as sugar didnât seem to have a use-by date and the castle was slightly younger than siege times, they were set.

They found a hoard of a hundred or so empty jars. Hamish downloaded a recipe from the Internet. They had a couple buckets of cumquats.

Which left concentration.

Concentration was harder.

Susie had to remove pips from every cumquat. Hamish was standing right beside her, pipping his own cumquats. The castle was totally silent. Taffy and Rose were fast asleep. Marcia was in her room, online to the other side of the world.

Werenât you supposed to talk companionably as you cooked? Susie thought. Wasnât that in the manual?

He was so big. So male. He was focussed on each individual cumquat pip as if it was his next million-dollar deal.

He was justâ¦justâ¦

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She was soâ¦

So what? He didnât know. She was pipping her cumquats in silence, focussed absolutely on the job in hand. She was holding a cumquat half at armâs length, squinting at it so she wouldnât get hit in the eye by juice as she prodded for the pip. Her tongue was out to the side, just a little bit. Intense concentration.

For marmalade.

Sheâd make a good futures broker, he thought. She was up to approximately cumquat number ninety and she hadnât faltered. Intelligence. Persistence. Great little tongue. Cute nose. Eyes that were soâ¦

âHow many more, do you think?â she asked, and he hauled himself back to cumquat duty with a start.

âIâm thinking weâve done enough.â

âRight.â She eyed the rest of the cumquats theyâd pickedâin a bucket on the floor and as yet unpippedâand shoved them under the bench with her bare toe. Out of sight. Maybe she wouldnât make such a great futures broker. Maybe sheâd make a better criminal lawyer.

He started to smile but she was waiting, expectant, and he had to haul his thoughts together and turn to the recipe.

âOK. Put the cumquats and sugar together and cook until done.

âJust like that?â

âThatâs what it says.â

âNo skill at all. I could do this myself.â

âWould you like to?â

She hesitated. âNo. I wouldnât know what to do at the end.â

âIt says what to do here.â

âGreat. You read and Iâll stir,â she said. âOK?â

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So she stirred and he read and he stirred and she read and then they both sat and watched the vast pot of honey-gold marmalade until finally, finally their test drop formed a skin and Hamish announced that it was done.

Their cleaned jars had been sitting in the range for the duration of the cooking, slowly warming. Hamish set the jars out and Susie poured and poured and poured until they had thirty-odd jars of cumquat marmalade lined up on the big kitchen table. They attached lids, they cleaned up their mess and then they turned and looked in satisfaction at what theyâd done.

All evening theyâd worked almost in silence. It wasnât that theyâd meant to be silent or that they were uncomfortable with each other, it was simply that words were unnecessary, Susie thought. Now, as she looked at the golden jars, words were even more unnecessary. What theyâd done this eveningâ¦

Sheâd take this home with her. Would she eat it? Maybe, but maybe sheâd keep one jar.

How long did marmalade last?

How long did love last?

Where had that come from? Dumb thought. She thought of Rory, of standing beside the man she loved, making her wedding vows. Sheâd thought it would be for ever.

And now she was standing beside this big, kindly man who was Roryâs cousin. What she felt for him wasâ¦different.

Of course it was different. How could she love Hamish?

How could she not?

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But Hamishâs thoughts were on practicalities. âWeâll box them up,â he said softly, looking at the pots with the air of a man whoâd done a difficult job to his satisfaction. âIf we send them air freight theyâll get there as fast as you will. Youâll be able to eat Loganaich Castle Marmalade for breakfast every morning.â

âWill you keep some, too?â

âSure.â He eyed the bucket under the bench. This was a great new splinter skill. How come heâd never thought of doing such a thing? âMaybe Marcia and I can make some more. But do you want all these?â he asked, suddenly uncertain. âIf you eat porridge for breakfast, then youâll hardly use thirty pots of marmalade.â

âI only eat porridge while Iâm here. I never eat porridge while Iâm anywhere else.â

He relaxed. âVery wise. So if Marcia and I make more marmalade we can send it over.â

âMaybe this is enough.â

âItâll last for a good long time.â He grinned, trying to tease her to smile. He liked it when she smiled. The stress lines around her eyes faded, making her seem younger, more carefree. Which was how she should be. âEvery time you eat it you can think that the cumquat trees havenât lived in vain.â

But that was a mistake. As soon as the words were out he knew that heâd committed an error. Reminding her the cumquat trees were doomed.

âI guess Iâll remember theyâve been knocked down.â

âIf you want to be miserable you can think that.â

âI donât want to be miserable.â

âThen donât think about it. Move on, Susie.â

âStop remembering this place?â

âIf it makes you emotional, yes.â

âIf I stopped thinking about anything that makes me emotional Iâd be in for a pretty barren existence.â

âYou stay under control that way.â

âWhich is important?â

âOf course itâs important.â He moved to adjust a marmalade jar which had dared not be in line with the others. Right. He now had thirty perfectly controlled pots.

But moving hot jam jars was a mistake. The jar he moved cracked, like a mini-explosion in the stillness. Maybe the jam had been too hot. Maybe the jar hadnât been heated up enough. Whatever the reason, there was suddenly jam running over the table, spoiling his careful symmetry.

He moved to shift the nearest jars away from the broken one. He lifted one, then swore as the heat seared through the cloth heâd used to lift it. He dropped itâand it cracked like its neighbour.

âIâd just let them settle this among themselves,â Susie said cautiously, eyeing the mess with trepidation. âThis might be an instance where lack of control just has to be accepted.â

âI neverââ

âHamish, if you lift another jar youâre risking all-out calamity. I do want some marmalade to take home.â

He eyed the jars. He looked at his burnt fingers. He looked at the mess. âBut if I shifted theseââ

Susie grabbed his arm and tugged him over to the sink. âLeave it,â she ordered. âYour poor hands.â She plunged his hand under cold waterâwhich did feel better than trying to pick up more marmalade.

âIâll get some burn cream,â she told him but he shook his head.

âItâs minor.â

âThen stay under water for a little longer.â

So he did. The marmalade mess stayed untouched. He stayedâ¦out of control?

She was so close. She was holding his arm, forcing his hand to stay under the water. She was soâ¦

âSusie, Iâm really sorry about the trees,â he managed.

âYou donât have to be sorry about the trees,â she said stiffly.

âIf I didnât think what Marcia said made senseâ¦ If I didnât realise that any purchaser will do exactly that, chop them down

to make way for a poolâ¦â

âOf course,â she said, and sniffed. âItâs totally sensible.â She sniffed again.

âSusie, donât cry.â

âIâm not crying.â

Of course she was crying. Tears were welling up behind her eyes, threatening to fall at any minute.

âOK, we wonât do it,â he said desperatelyâand she dropped his hand in astonishment.

âWhat?â

âWe wonât pull down the orange trees.â

âJust because I cried?â she said cautiously.

âI canât bear to see youââ

âYou canât bear to see me cry so youâll do what I want.â She thought about it, and suddenly the tears welled up even more. âI think I need a slice of your inheritance.â

âSusieâ¦â

âOh, I do.â Tears were streaming down her face now. âI really do. And I want you to promise me that youâll wear your kilt every third Monday of the month for the rest of your life.â

He was backing off. âDonât be ridiculous.â

She wiped her face with the back of her hand, turning off the tears like a tap. There was dangerous mischief glinting behind the tears. âItâs not me whoâs being ridiculous.â

âYouâ¦â He stared at her, stunned. âYou turned on those tearsâ¦â

âAt will. Neat trick, isnât it?â

âTo get what you want?â

âI never cry to get what I want.â

âYou just did.â

âBelieve it or not, I didnât. If you think I really want you wearing a kilt, driving the women of this world crazyâ¦â

âThen whyâ?â

âI was teasing, Hamish Douglas. Teasing. Youâve never heard of the word?â

âBy crying.â

âCan we leave the crying alone? Itâs getting boring.â

This was crazy. She was standing there glaring at him, her eyes still wet, marmalade splashed all over her T-shirt, daring

himâ¦daring himâ¦

âI hate you to cry,â he said, sounding dumb, but he didnât know how else to sound.

âSo Iâm not crying.â

âSusieâ¦â

âWhat?â she said, almost crossly, and she folded her arms across her breasts and glared.

âYouâre crazy.â

âSure. Iâm crazy.â

âI wantâ¦â

âWhat do you want, Hamish Douglas?â

What did he want?

The question hung. He glared at her, marmalade-stained and rumpled and angry and not crying, and suddenlyâ¦

Suddenly the mist cleared to make way for one dumb plan. There was a myriad of emotions running through his head right now, emotions chasing their respective tails, but the only thing he could think was a stupid, unwise, crazy thought. But once thought, it was not possible to put it aside. It was just there. It had to surface.

It did surface. âI want to kiss you,â he said.

There was a momentâs silence. A long momentâs silence. She appeared to consider, jutting her chin slightly forward, slightly belligerent, taking her time to come up with a response.

And finally she did.

âWell, why donât you?â she said.

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What was he doing, wanting to kiss Susie?

Was he mad? He was engaged to Marcia. Marcia could walk in at any minute. Even though she wasnât possessive, to find her fiancÃ© kissing another woman might push her a wee bit far.

Might? It would, he thought wildly, searching frantically for the control he so valued.

But his control was nowhere to be found. For Susie was right in front of him. Battered, bruised and beloved Susie.

Beloved? Where had that word come from?

It was just there. As was Susie. She was right in front of him, ready and waiting to be kissed.

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Was she mad? Was she losing her cotton-picking mind? To kiss Hamishâ¦ To let him kiss herâ¦

He was engaged to another woman and the day after tomorrow she was leaving here and sheâd never see him again in her life.

Which was whyâ¦which was why she was proposing to let him kiss her, she decided. For there was a tiny part of her brain that said this was all there was, this moment, this tiny connection that could only last for one fleeting kiss and then be over.

Sheâd dared him to kiss her. And heâd do just that. Or she certainly hoped he would.

The signs were good.

He had his hands on her waist. He was taking his time, lingering, looking down into her eyes as he drew her against him. He was making sure that he wasnât coercing her. He was making sure that she hadnât made some daft, stupid mistake when sheâd agreed to be kissed.

Maybe she had made some daft, stupid mistake but she wasnât admitting it. Not now, when he was so near. So close.

Not when he was soâ¦Hamish.

She was being drawn into him now. She was allowing those big, capable handsâthese lovely, strong and battered handsâto pull her against him. Her breasts were being moulded against the strength of his chest. His hand shifted to cup her chin, tilting her face so her eyes met his.

Things were looking hopeful here. Very hopeful indeed.

He smiled down at her then, a rueful, searching smile that asked more questions than it answered. But there was such tenderness in his look. Suchâ¦love?

He was asking a silent question, but she couldnât respond. How could she respond? She gazed helplessly up at him, and the last vestiges of her laughter faded as she felt her heart lurch sideways. As she felt her heart still, and then start to race as it had almost forgotten it could race.

As she fell. As she tumbled deeper and deeper in love with the man before her.

He was engaged to another woman. She tried to think that but she couldnât.

For it simply couldnât matter. This was too important, she

thought. Hamish intended to kiss her and all she could do was waitâ¦and hope.

Or raise her face a little more to meet his kiss?

Or she could put her hands on his face and draw him down to her.

Definitely. Sheâd definitely do that.

She could not think of Marcia. Or Rory. There was no room to think of anything or anyone but Hamish.

And his kiss.

She could drown in this kiss.

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What was he doing? Kissing a woman who wasnât Marcia?

He was doing what was right, he decided. He was doing what needed to be done.

He was doing what heâd ached to do from the moment heâd first seen Susie.

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Oh, the feel of him. The strength, and yet the tenderness. The certainty and yet the hesitation. His mouth plundered hers, yet she knew that if she pulled backâat the slightest hint of pressureâheâd release her.

For this was no man claiming his rights. He was as unsure as she was, as stunned by the strength of feeling between them, and the feeling was unbelievably erotic.

Hamish.

The wild beating of her heart settled and things slipped into place, things that had been out of kilter with her world for so long. Sheâd thought when Rory had died that she could never love againâbut the heart expanded to fit all needs.

She still loved Rory. Sheâd love him till the day she died but Hamish was a different man, a different love. Her new, wonderful love.

His lips were on hers and he kissed her as sheâd ached to be kissedâbut she hadnât known there was this ache within her. His lips were tentative, tasting her, feeling her response, feeling by the faint parting of her lips that he was, oh, so welcome.

Hamish.

Maybe she said his name. She didnât know. But his kiss

moved, to her nose, gently teasing. To her eyelids, maybe tasting the salt still left by her tears. Her fake tears, produced to mock, but how could she ever mock this man?

His fingers were raking her hair and the sensation was magic. She moaned a little and kissed him back, finding his mouth and claiming it. Tugging his body hard against hers. Curving into him.

She lifted his hand and led it to her breast. Her body was arching against his. It had been almost two long years since sheâd been held by a man. Sheâd loved one man and sheâd thought her body could never fit with another but she was wrong, oh, she was gloriously, wonderfully wrong. Her Hamish.

Marcia was nowhere. Marcia simply didnât exist. But this was no betrayal. Susie was no traitorous vixen searching for another womanâs man. This had gone way past that. Hamish belonged to no other woman.

Hamish was simply a part of her.

She locked his arms behind him, then lifted her head to allow him to kiss her as deeply as he wanted. He was tasting her neck, caressing her shoulders with his tongue, and the sensation was so exquisite she thought she must sob with aching pleasure. He slipped his fingers under the soft fabric of her T-shirt, cupping the smooth contours of her breasts, making her moan softly with love and desire. Her hands were locked about his head now, deepening the kiss, deepening, deepeningâ¦

There was such want. She hadnât known how alone she was until tonight, when suddenly she was no longer alone.

This man was her man. She knew it at some primeval level she couldnât begin to understand and didnât want to try. The only place in the world that she should ever be at peace was right here, in this manâs arms.

Within the arms of the man she truly loved.

She melted into his kiss with abandon, surrendering to the promise of his body. To the feeling that here in his arms anything was possible. Sheâd never be lonely. Sheâd never be alone. With Hamish beside her, she could take on the world.

âSusie,â he whispered, and his voice was as unsteady as she felt. âDear God, Susie, we canât.â

âWe canâtâ¦?â

âMake love.â

She froze at that. She froze and thought about it. And reality came flooding back. Awareness of her surroundings.

Awareness of Marcia?

âYou mean we canât make love right here in the marmalade.â

âWellâ¦itâd be a bit sticky.â

âI guess.â She pulled away a little, searching to see his face. He looked dazed. Confused. And a little afraid?

âHey, thereâs no need to look scared,â she said, and he shook his head, searching for some sort of reality.

âIâm not scared.â

Reality was slamming back fast. Marcia was just upstairs. Hamish was engaged to be married to Marcia. Susie was on her own. The day after tomorrow she was leaving here. Hamish had never said he wanted her. He never said he needed her, yet here she was, wearing her heart on her sleeve, making herself wantonly available.

It couldnât be wanton to kiss the man she loved.

But he didnât love her. She could see. If his eyes reflected hers theyâd be full of love and desire and heâd be moving to hug her, moving to claim her.

Instead of which he was staring at her as if she were some sort of witch, capable of casting a spell.

âI didnât meanâ¦â

It needed only that.

âYou didnât mean to kiss me?â

âNo. Susie, Iâmââ

âEngaged to Marcia.â Somehow she made her voice work. âOf course. Iâ¦ Look, itâs late and weâre overtired andâand it was only a good-night kiss after all.â

Liar, she screamed at herself, but he was nodding, though his eyes said he knew as well as she did that it had been no such thing.

âWe canâtâ¦ Susie, Marcia and I are getting married.â

âOf course. And you and I, weâd be impossible. Iâm so emotional.â

âYes,â he said, and there was almost relief in his voice. âYou cry.â

âI do,â she agreed cordially, feeling like crying now, but there was no way sheâd cry. Something was being destroyed that had hardly started to be created.

He was still looking at her as if he was afraid. She wanted to scream. She wanted toâ¦

She didnât know what she wanted.

âOf course I cry,â she whispered. âAnd you hate crying. I cry all the time, happy and sad, and you canât stand it.â An errant tear rolled down her cheek right then and she wiped it away with anger. He was rightâshe couldnât even stop crying to save herself.

âIâm not in control,â she admitted. âWell, thatâs OK, thatâs the state of my existence, but for a moment there you werenât in control either. Thatâs whatâs scaring you, isnât it? You hate it. Well.â She took a long, searing breath, searching frantically for the words to say to finish it. As it had to be finished.

She finally found them, right or not, but the words that had to be said.

âMarciaâs upstairs, Hamish. Sheâs your fiancÃ©e. Sheâs your future. And I need to check on Taffy. I need to check on Rose. My baby and my puppy. Theyâre my future. And by kissing you Iâm just interfering with the way of the world. With the way things have to be from this day forth.â

And before he could say another word sheâd turned and fled, out of the kitchen door, back out into the night.

To the vegetable garden? To the conservatory? To the beach?

He couldnât know. There were tears welling in her eyes as she turned away. He couldnât follow.

Should he go to Marcia?

No. He was going to bed. Alone.

CHAPTER NINE

HAMISH went upstairs. He paused by Marciaâs door, feeling bad. He knocked lightly and opened the door a crack. Marcia was on the phone, her laptop on her knees, listening intently to the person at the end of the line and staring at her screen. She looked up briefly, saw it was him and blew him a kiss, using the phone instead of fingers.

He wasnât wanted. He closed the door and went to his own room.

Bed.

Sleep?

It was nowhere to be found.

Why had he kissed her? It wasnât as if he could possibly take this any further. It was so unsuitable. Hell, if he married Susie sheâd expectâ¦

More than a telephone kiss good-night?

It could never work. He thought of the house heâd grown up in, a house full of hysterical women who had used their emotions to manipulate everyone around them. Heâd fought so hard to get away from that. To catapult himself back into itâ¦

Susie wouldnât try to manipulate him.

No, but she couldnât help it. He thought of finishing work and heading home as he usually did, exhausted beyond belief. Collapsing into bed before getting up to do some hard gym work before the next day at the office. How would Susie fit into that?

Sheâd hate it. Heâd hate it. He wouldnât do it.

What would he do instead?

Cut it out, he told himself fiercely into the night. Youâve spent the last thirty years building up the life you want and to toss it all away for oneâ¦oneâ¦

It wouldnât be one, he told himself grimly. Itâd be more. Susie came with attachments. Rose. Taffy. And more. Sheâd want more.

And theyâd all be emotional. He thought of Taffy sitting on

the grass and howling her lungs out because she couldnât get what she wanted.

He grinned.

No. Be serious. Get up and go see whatâs Marcia working on.

She wouldnât thank him for the interference. She was fiercely independent.

Good. Great.

Life was fine. Go to sleep.

Ha.

He lay for another half-hour or so, listening to the soft hush-hush of the sea. The castle was quiet.

Maybe he could go down and chat to Ernst and Eric.

As if on cue, there was a knock on the door. He didnât have to resort to tin-plated armour, he thought. Itâd be Marcia.

âCome in,â he called, and wondered why he felt empty. As though Marcia coming in was going to expose something he didnât want exposed.

But it wasnât Marcia. It was Susie, peering round the door, her face worried in the moonlight.

âSorry to wake you.â

âYou didnât wake me.â He was half out of bed. âWhatâs wrong?â

âNothing. I justâ¦ Is Taffy here?â

âNo.â

âAre you sure?â

âSure Iâm sure.â He frowned. âMy bedroom door was shut when I came upstairs and itâs shut now. She couldnât have got in.â

âOh. Sorry, then.â

âIs she lost?â He was out of bed, crossing the floor, concerned.

âNo,â she said, urgently, stopping him in his tracks. âThereâs no need for you to come.â

âBut if you canât find herâ¦â

âSheâll be somewhere sound asleep,â she said. âThis place is too big. Weâll find her when she wakes up.â

âBut you were looking for her now.â

âI thought Iâd take her outside for a piddle before I went to bed. But if sheâs curled up somewhere I canât find her then Iâll

have to wait until she wakes up.â

âButâ¦how will you know?â

âIâd imagine Taffy is very good at letting us know where she is when sheâs hungry,â she said, and he could tell that she was making a huge effort to keep her voice light. Damn, he shouldnât have kissed her. It had brought in all these tensions that he didnât have a clue what to do with. âYouâve heard her howl.â

âSo I have,â he said. âButââ

âGo back to bed, Hamish,â she told him.

âHave you checked Marciaâs room?â

âYes. Sheâs been working all the time. Sheâs still working now. I thoughtâ¦ Anyway, if you hear Taffy raising a riot in the wee small hours youâll know what it is. Iâve warned Marcia.â

âLet me help you find her.â

âNo,â she said flatly. âPlease, Hamish, go back to bed.â

âIâd like to help.â

âI donât want you helping.â She hesitated. âHamish, I need to be by myself. For the rest of the time Iâm here. Iâm not sure why what happened tonight happened, but it was dumb and meaningless and I need to back right off. Good night, Hamish.â

She closed the door before he could respond.

He should follow. He could help her search. The thought of Susie searching for her pup in this vast castle left him uneasy.

The thought of Susie doing anything alone left him uneasy.

What had she said? What happened tonight was dumb and meaningless?

Of course it was. They both knew it. Susie was a woman who was controlled by her emotions, and heâ¦well, he knew where emotions belonged.

They didnât belong with Susie!

Â

âTaffy?â

If Hamish heard, heâd come down and help. He mustnât hear. But where was a little dog out here in this huge garden? And the cliffs so nearâ¦ Taffy had gone over the road to the beach with them so she knew the way. If sheâd triedâ¦

There was only one path down to the beach. If sheâd become disoriented and ended up on the rocksâ¦

Should she ask Hamish for help?

No. It was as sheâd assured him. The night was calm and still and if Taffy needed anything she only had to howl. Sheâd be snoozing in some obscure corner, and if Hamish came down and helped her search for a puppy who didnât need finding then they mightâ¦they mightâ¦

She darenât ask Hamish for help. But she needed to find Taffy. She needed to hug her.

She needed to hug someone.

She was bone weary. She had a huge day tomorrow. She should be in bed right now.

Instead, she was just going to walk over the road to the beginning of the path to the beach. Just to check.

âTaffy?â

Â

Seven a.m. Hamish walked into the kitchen, wanting coffee, and Jake was standing at the kitchen bench. Fully clothed. Pouring coffee.

Maybe it was a guy thing but walking in on a man who was fully dressed and looked ready for businessâhard, physical businessâwhen wearing boxer shorts and nothing else made Hamish feel a bit like retreating. Fast. He eyed Jakeâs workman-like moleskins and heavy-duty shirt with misgivings.

âMorning?â he said cautiously, and Jake swivelled to stare at him.

This wasnât a stare of âOoh, whoâs wearing ancient boxers?â. It was a stare of active dislike.

âGood of you to join us,â he growled.

Hamish glanced at his watch. Seven was not what youâd call a slovenly hour to wake up.

âAre you here for breakfast?â

âWe had breakfast an hour ago.â

âWe?â

âThe girls and I. Kirstyâs taken Rose home with her. Susieâs searching the bushland behind the garden. Iâve come back to make a few phone calls. Weâll get some back-up.â His voice was so cold each word was practically an icicle âI want Susie to get some rest. Sheâs not fit to be searching as sheâs been doing all

night.â

His heart stilled.

âTaffy,â he said. âHell, she didnât find Taffy.â

If anything, Jakeâs expression grew colder. âShe said she told you the pup was lost. I thought she must have been mistaken. To let her stay up all nightâ¦â

âShe didnât stay up all night.â

âOh, she didnât?â Jake said. âFine.â

Hamish stared at Jake in consternation. Jake stared back, as if Hamish was something lower than pond scum.

âI offered to search with her,â Hamish said desperately. âShe said she was sure the pup was somewhere in the castle. That sheâd howl when she woke up. Sheâs good at howling.â

âItâs not much use howling when youâre outside,â Jake muttered, more to himself than to Hamish. âThereâs owls hunting at night. If Taffyâs attracted one of themâ¦ Iâm thinking thatâs what will have happened.â

âSheâs not outside,â Hamish said flatly. âSheâs in the castle.â

âIf she was in the castle sheâd be howling by now. Sheâs a ten-week-old pup who hasnât been fed for twelve hours.â

âBut she was locked in the wet room. Susie put her there when she put Rose down for the night.â

âI gather Marcia used the wet room as a passage early last night,â Jake said. âIt seems she left the door open.â

Hamish thought back. Marcia in the conservatory, fielding phone calls. Marcia walking back to the house to get notes. Sheâd never notice a pupâ¦

âWhereâs Marcia now?â

âOn the phone to New York. Where do you think?â Jakeâs voice said Marcia was right there in the pond with Hamish.

âShe hasnât seen the pup?â

âWhat do you think?

Hamish was already backing out the door, heading for some clothes. âWhy are you here?â

âSusie rang Kirsty at dawn.â

âOver a dog?â

âDumb, isnât it?â Jake said cordially. âOnly a dog. But Susie loves her.â

Hamish closed his eyes. âIâll get dressed.â

âRight,â Jake said politely, turning back to the phone. âIâll add you to the search party, shall I?â

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âSheâll be dead.â Susie stood in the middle of the cove and stared despairingly along the beach. âSheâll have been taken by an owl or an eagle. Itâs just dumb to keep looking. Dumb, dumb, dumb.â

âHey, itâs not hopeless,â Kirsty told her. Sheâd left all the kids with her housekeeper and come straight back. âWe have half Dolphin Cove out searching. Jake says the numbers are up to eighty already.â

âEighty?â Susie hiccuped on a mix of laughter and a sob. âFor one little puppy.â

âEveryone loves you,â Kirsty said solidly. âThereâs people coming from everywhere to look.â

âSheâll be dead.â

âWeâll keep looking until we find her.â

Â

Hamish couldnât believe it. Heâd been out in the bushland behind the castleâthree hours of combing the rough gullies and hillside, searching in what seemed an increasingly hopeless case. Heâd returned to find the kitchen like a military planning area.

âWhatâd happen if a child was lost?â he asked in amazement.

Kirsty looked up from the table where she was crossing grid lines off a map and gave him a weary smile.

âMore of the same.â She shrugged. âMuch more. OK, it might be over the top but the windâs up, which means the fishing fleet canât get out, so the fishermen donât have anything else to do. And everyone knows Susieâs leaving tomorrow. Weâre upset about it already, without this happening.â

âWhereâs Susie now?â

âI talked her into having a lie down.â She hesitated. âYou know, Susieâs not just devastated because of the puppy.â

He thought about it and decided, yes, Kirsty was right, but he knew where Kirsty was headed and there were places there he didnât want to go.

âSheâll miss you, too,â he said, deliberately obtuse, and she gave him a long, thoughtful look that reminded him

uncomfortably of her twin.

âAs you say.â

âIs Jake out searching?â

âJake had morning surgery. He had to go.â

So Jake was getting on with business. âWell, someone has some sense.â

Her face stilled at that. Yes, she really was very like Susie, he thought, and then he thought about what heâd said. Maybe it hadnât beenâ¦sensible?

âSense is a really strange thing,â she said softly. âJust when you think you have it cornered, it turns into something else. Be careful what you think is sensible, Hamish Douglas. It might just turn around and bite you.â

âHamish.â

As if on cue, a voice came from the door. He turned and Marcia was standing in the doorway, looking displeased. âWhere have you been?â

âOut searching.â The cell phone in her hand vibrated before he could say any more. She stared at the screen, prioritised and abandoned the caller.

How often was she separated from her phone? Hamish thought, and then he wondered how often heâd been separated from his. Until heâd come here, maybe never.

âYouâre wanted,â she said briefly, obviously annoyed.

âSusie wants me?â

âBy the hotel assessor,â she snapped. âYou knew he was coming this morning. Heâs in the drawing room. Iâve shown him around but he wants to talk to youâand to Susie.â

âIâll come,â he said wearily, raking his hand through his hair. âBut Susieâs not to be disturbed.â He turned back to Kirsty. âLet me know if thereâs any news.â

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Hamish had to focus.

Lachlan Glendinning was the representative of an international realty firm. Heâd been valuing a hotel up in Northern Queensland and heâd taken time and considerable trouble to travel to Dolphin Bay. Telling him he couldnât spend time with him because a puppy was missingâespecially when Susie had the whole town combing the surrounding estate

looking for himâseemed crazy.

But there was no mistaking that outside with the search party was where Hamish wanted to be.

Why? he wondered as he answered Lachlanâs endless questions, going over the family history as he knew it. Luckily heâd read many of Angusâs family papers so he had the answers to most questions. But his eyes kept straying outside. People were going back and forth under the window. He could see people down on the beach.

âI hear thereâs a lost dog,â Lachlan said genially. He was smooth and slick and clever, knowing exactly what he was looking for in the real estate market and knowing heâd found it in Loganaich Castle. âThis is quite some community spirit you have here. The townâs picturesque, too. Iâm thinking we could build this really big.â

âIâm sure you could,â Marcia agreed. Sheâd abandoned her cell phone and had joined in the conversation with enthusiasm. She and Lachlan spoke the same language.

âI really would like to speak to Mrs Douglas,â Lachlan said regretfully. âAre you sure thereâs no way?â

âThereâs no way.â Hamish rose. âMarcia, would you like to show Lachlan the grounds? If heâs seen all there is hereâ¦â

âIâve seen enough of the inside,â Lachlan said. âItâs a great interior.â They passed into the hall and he poked at Ernst with his gold-embellished fountain pen. âThough these guys will have to go. I know where we can get some real ones.â

âErnst and Eric are coming home with me.â

It was Susie, entering unannounced. Her face was pale and there were the ravages where tears had been, but there were no tears left now. She was dignified and in control, and she introduced herself and took Marciaâs place by Lachlanâs side as if it was her right.

âIâll show you the garden,â she told him. âIâm sure Marcia and Hamish have business to attend to.â

âI should go back online,â Marcia agreed, and Susie gave her a bright and brittle smile.

âOf course.â

âIâll go back to the search,â Hamish said softly, but the look she directed at him had no trace of a smile left in it.

âItâs no use,â she told him. âTaffyâs dead. Sheâs been out all

night. If the nocturnal owls didnât kill her, the wedge-tail eagles will have by now.â She turned to Lachlan. âIâm sorry I wasnât here to greet you. Marcia says youâll be thinking about converting the conservatory to a swimming pool before any sale is made. You need to see it. Iâll take you.â

âSusie, you donât need to think about that,â Hamish said uneasily, and received a flash of anger for his pains.

âI know I donât need to think about it, Lord Douglas,â she snapped, emphasising his title with a short, harsh syllable. âMy plane leaves tomorrow afternoon and after that this is all your business. This castle is in the hands of the heir. Thatâs you. And youâre going to sell it and put the money in the bank.â

âWhich is the only sensible place for it,â Marcia interspersed.

âIt is,â Susie agreed dully. âOf course it is. So, shall we see the possible site for your luxury swimming pool, Mr Glendinning?â

âSusie, go look for your puppy,â Hamish said desperately, and she looked like she wanted to slap him.

âMy puppy is dead.â

Then why wasnât she crying? Hamish thought. She should be crying. Heâd know what to do if she cried.

What was he saying? He wanted a woman to cry?

âWeâll show Mr Glendinning the conservatory together,â he said, gently now, but her anger was increasing.

âWeâll do nothing together.â

âSusieâ¦â

âLet her go,â Marcia said. âSheâs got the time, Hamish. Surely you have better things to be doing.â

What? he thought blankly. What?

âIâll go back to the beach.â

âGive it up,â Marcia said wearily. âDidnât you hear Susie? The creatureâs dead.â

The creature.

He was supposed to be marrying this woman.

He thought of Taffy last night, sitting plump on her bottom and howling her displeasure.

The creature.

âWe have no proof sheâs dead,â he said, to the room in general. âIf youâll excuse me, Iâll keep looking until weâre

sure.â

And he walked away and left them to it.

Â

Why hadnât she cried?

All that long day Hamish watched Susie move like an automaton. She spent a long time with Lachlan, detailing the castle to his satisfaction. She worked in the kitchen, feeding the searchers. She did a bit more searching herself but her back was obviously paining her. She was limping badly and when Kirsty decreed she should stop, she stopped. She went back to packing, the pile of stuff she was discarding growing higher and higher.

âIâll ship Ernst and Eric over to you,â Hamish said at one stage, and if looks could kill, heâd have been dead right then.

âIâve changed my mind. Theyâd never be at home with me in America. They belong at the foot of the stairs and if you want to shift themâ¦well, thatâs your business and I donât want to know about it.â

âSusie, stay a little longer,â he urged.

âWhy?â

âWe donât know about Taffy.â

âWe do know about Taffy. Cut it out, Hamish. Iâm leaving.â

She wouldnât budge.

Â

At dusk Marcia came to find Hamish. She met him on the way upstairs to change. Heâd been bashing through thick bushland in an increasingly hopeless search for Taffy, and he was filthy.

âWe need to take Lachlan out to dinner,â she said. âHeâs spent the day photographing the castle from every angleânot that youâd have noticed. Honestly, Hamish, your behaviour has been less than civil. Heâs staying at the pub tonight. Itâd be better if we could put him up here, but I dare say you wonât ask the widow to do that.â

âDo you have to call her the widow?â

âYou know who I mean.â

âI wonât ask Susie to have another guest on her last night,â Hamish snapped, wondering again how heâd never noticed how insensitive Marcia was. âItâs bad enough that weâre here. Jake

and Kirsty are bringing dinner. Susie needs her family and no one else.â

âThen you and I should at least take him out to dinner. Youâre not Susieâs family.â

He wasnât. Hamish hesitated. Marcia was right. He should give Lachlan dinner. Andâ¦would Susie want him to be around tonight?

But Kirsty came through the front door then, carrying a casserole.

âHi,â she told them. âDinner in thirty minutes?â

âWeâre going out to dinner,â Marcia said, sounding efficient.

âOh?â Kirsty raised her eyebrows. âYou, too?â she asked Hamish.

âUmâ¦â

âI shouldnât put pressure on you,â Kirsty told him. âBut it would be better if you were here tonight.â

âWhy?â Marcia demanded. âWhy should Hamish stay?â

Kirsty looked a bit taken aback at that, as if she hadnât actually expected an argument.

âTo leaven the loaf,â she said at last. âSusieâs miserable. Weâve searched a two-mile radius and Taffyâs nowhere. Taffy was supposed to be the little bit of Dolphin Bay she was taking away with her. Now thereâs just Susie and Rose.â

Not even Ernst and Eric, Hamish thought, leaning back on a suit of armour. Welcoming the sharp dig of a halberd in the small of his back.

âSusie will be better off without a pup,â Marcia said sharply. âThe fewer encumbrances, the better.â

Kirsty looked at her thoughtfully. Appraisingly. Then glanced sideways at Hamish, leaning wearily on his halberd.

âYouâre taking the assessor, Lachlan, out to dinner?â she asked Marcia.

âThatâs right.â

âThen can I ask that you, Marcia, take Lachlan out to dinner, and you, Hamish, stay here and see if you can cheer Susie up. Wear your kilt or something.â

âI suspect thereâs not a lot thatâll cheer Susie up,â Hamish said.

âNo,â she admitted. âBut we can try.â

Hamish hesitated.

Marcia looked at her watch. She tapped her foot. She looked at Hamish and saw indecision. Or maybeâ¦decision. There was one thing that could always be said about Marcia: she was good at sussing which way the wind was blowing. She was excellent at not wearing herself out fighting the inevitable.

âIâll go, then,â she said, visibly annoyed. âHonestly, Hamish, someone has to keep a business head on their shoulders in this whole debacle.â

âThey do,â he agreed, but he was watching Kirsty, seeing Kirstyâs disapproval, thinking how very like her twin she was. Was Susie vibrating with the same disapproval?

Probably not, he thought. Sheâd be in her bedroom, sorting the last things she wanted to take from this place. Sheâd be thinking of Angus, or of Taffy, or of walking away from her vegetable garden and leaving her wonderful conservatory to be ripped apart. Thereâd be no room in her distraught mind for disapproval of one dumb would-be earl.

âYouâre not spending more time looking for the dog?â Marcia was demanding, looking at him as if she didnât know who he was any more. Which, come to think of it, was pretty much exactly how he was feeling about himself. âEveryoneâs saying itâll be dead.â

âSheâll be dead,â Kirsty said softly, and the look she gave Hamish then was slightly doubtful. âBut weâll give the grounds one more sweep after dinner.â

âMiracles donât happen,â Hamish said flatly, and Kirsty gave him another odd look.

âWeâll see. We certainly have enough pumpkins around here for a spell or two to happen.â She shook herself, obviously perturbed that she was getting fanciful. âOK. I have a full casserole dinner ready to be brought in from the car, provided by the ladies of Dolphin Creek. Any crisis round here, sick baby, lost puppy, canât solve yesterdayâs crossword, youâll be handed a casseroleâso we have, at last count, eleven. Marcia, if you and Lachlan arenât joining us, weâd better start now. We have a lot of eating to do.â

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It was a very strained meal. They had eleven casseroles. Between them they ate about half of one, and that was with Kirsty and

Jakeâs twins helping. The two little girls were the only bright company during the meal, but even their chatter was pointed.

âDaddy, why does Aunty Susie have to go back to America?â

âThatâs where her home is.â

âBut her home is here.â

âThis castle belongs to Lord Hamish now,â Jake told them gently.

âBut everyone says Lord Hamish doesnât want it.â

âLord Hamish doesnât have to want it,â Susie told the girls, with only a hint of a tremor in her voice. âItâs just the way things are. Itâs his, and I donât belong here any more.â

âBut youâre our Auntie Susie,â Alice said tremulously, and Penelope agreed.

âWe want you to stay. And you havenât got a puppy to take home now. Youâll be really, really lonely.â

âIâll have Rose,â Susie said, her voice strained to breaking point. She rose to fetch the coffeepot from the stove and started to pour. âCoffee, Hamish?â

âPlease.â

âNone for me,â Kirsty told her, and Susie stilled. Sheâd been facing the stove. Now she turned, very, very slowly, to face her twin.

âYou always have coffee after dinner.â

âIâ¦ Not now.â Kirsty seemed all at once uncomfortable and Susieâs face grew even more blank.

âI was right,â she said, and her voice was devoid of all expression. âAt the fair. You deflected me with Taffy and I was so preoccupied I let myself be deflected. Youâre pregnant.â

âOh, Susie,â Kirsty said, her face twisting in distress.

âThatâs lovely news,â Susie managed, and stooped to give her twin a hug. But there was no joy, Hamish thought, watching the tableau in incomprehension. What was going on?

âI so didnât want you to find out.â

âUntil when?â Susie turned back to her coffee cups.

âI thoughtâ¦until you were settled back in America.â

âWonât this make a difference?â Hamish asked, concerned. They both seemed on the edge of tears, but there were no tears. Just rigid control.

âSure,â Kirsty said coldly. âAsk Susie to stay because Iâm pregnant? How could I do that to her?â

Easy, Hamish thought, remembering his mother and his aunts. He knew exactly how emotional blackmail was done.

âI wonât ask for the same reason Susie hasnât asked you not to sell the castle. Not to destroy the greenhouse. I bet she hasnât, has she?â

âNo, butââ

âAnd if I did and you agreed?â Susie said, suddenly fierce. âHow do you think thatâd make me feel for the rest of my life? And if Kirsty thought I was staying now just for the babyâ¦she couldnât bear it. Thatâs why she hasnât told me. I donât know where you come from, Hamish Douglas, but we donât do emotional blackmail here.â She swallowed and turned her back on him, facing her sister again. âYouâre due when?â

âNot until November. Itâs early days yet.â

âIf I can, Iâll come back.â

âOf course you will.â

âTo stay?â Hamish said cautiously, and got another glare for his pains.

âTo visit. Like normal people do.â

âBut you guys are twins,â he said, feeling helpless. âYou should be together.â

âTheyâll be together for the birth,â Jake said, putting his hand across the table to reach his wife, taking Kirstyâs hand in his and holding it firmly and with love. âIf I have to sail across the Atlantic single-handed and haul Susie back here in chains, I promise youâll be together for the birth. Iâm covering the expenses and if Susie argues, then sheâll see what brothers-in-law are really made of.â

âOh, Jake,â Susie said, choked.

And Hamish thought, Here at last come the tears. But they didnât. Susie stared at her sister and her brother-in-law for a long momentâand then went back to her coffee-making.

With one mug of hot chocolate for the expectant mother.

CHAPTER TEN

KIRSTY and Jake and assorted kids left soon after. The arrangement was that they were taking Susie to the airport the next dayâJake had organised medical cover for the town from a locum service so both doctors could leave. They took all the kids home with them to give Susie a clear run with her packing.

âWeâll be here at eight tomorrow to pick you up,â Kirsty told her twin.

âIâll be ready,â Susie promised.

And Hamish thought once again, Why didnât she cry? She should be crying.

She cried at pumpkins. Why didnât she cry now? Suddenly he thought he wanted her to cry. Itâd be OK if she cried, he decided. It was the set, wooden expression on her face that he hated.

He stood in the hall and waited while she waved them off from the front step, and he was waiting for her as she returned.

âWhat would you like me to do?â he asked softly, and she glanced at him with suspicion.

âNothing.â

âIâll go down to the beach, then,â he said. âJust for a last check.â

âTaffyâs dead.â

âYou donât know that.â

âYes, I do. Iâm not stupid. Ten-week-old puppy in this terrainâ¦ I see things how they are, Hamish. Not how I want them to be.â

âYou should be able to hopeâ¦â

âI gave up on that when I buried Rory,â she said flatly. âNow, if you donât mind, I have things to do.â

âCan I help you pack?â He should butt out, he thought. He was adding to her distress just by being here. He felt so damned helplessâ¦

âI would appreciate help in Angusâs room,â she said, and

then looked as if she regretted saying it.

âWhat needs doing in Angusâs room?â

âItâs justâ¦â She hesitated. âIâve never cleared it out. I mean, it all belongs to you but I thoughtâ¦his personal stuffâ¦most of it needs to be thrown away but I donât want Marcia doing it.â The last few words were said in a rush, fiercely, and he thought sheâd burst into tears but she didnât. She was pale and almost defiant, tilting her chin as though expecting to meet a fight.

âMarciaâs the least sentimental of all of us,â he said mildly and her chin came forward another inch.

âAll the more reason why she shouldnât be the one who takes care of it.â

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So on a night when she should be doing her own personal packing, when the last vestiges of the search party made vain sweeps of the beach and the hillside looking for Taffy, when Kirsty and Jake cared for the kids so Susie could spend one night alone with her memories, she and Hamish sat on Angusâs bedroom floor and sortedâ¦stuff.

Stuff.

Deirdreâs stuff and Angusâs stuff. The old man hadnât cleared his wifeâs things, and everything was still there.

The clothes were easy. Theyâd go to the welfare shops. Hamish could be trusted with that so, with the exception of Angusâs kilt and sporran and beret, they were bundled into boxes to be carted away.

But the kilt and beret and sporranâ¦ âI donât know what to do with these,â Susie whispered, holding up a kilt that was far too small for Hamish.

Hamish fingered the fabric, watching the graceful fall of the pleats, thinking of the times Angus must have worn this, the number of fÃªtes heâd opened in this town, the affection in which heâd been held.

âIs there a local museum?â

âNo.â

âA library maybe?â

âYesâ¦â

âThen why donât we donate it as a display?â he suggested. âI could donate the cost of a display cabinet. We could put Angusâs

and Deirdreâs photos in it, photos that show them as they were, vibrant and having fun, and set this costume up beside it. Do you think the locals would like it?â

There was a momentâs hesitation. Had he said the wrong thing?

Would she cry?

She didnât cry. âThatâd be wonderful,â she said in a small voice. âCan I leave it with you to see that itâs done?â

âOf course.â

She nodded, a brisk, businesslike little nod that had him wishing, wishing sheâd falter a little, give him roomâ¦

Room to what?

âIâm not marrying Marcia,â he said into the stillness, and her head jerked up from the papers she was sorting.

âYouâre what?â

He hadnât even known he was going to say it. He hadnât even really thought about it.

Or maybe he had.

Heâd approached marriage to Marcia as he approached business propositions, he thought. The marriage would be advantageous to both of them. But these last few days had been like the switching on of a lightbulb in a dimly lit room. Suddenly he could see colour where before heâd only seen grey.

Suddenly heâd not only stopped fearing emotion, he was thinking a bit more emotion wouldnât be such a bad thing.

Like Susie crying so he could hug her better?

âDoes Marcia know youâre not marrying her?â Susie asked. Her head lowered again, and her voice dulled. She was in a grey world of her own right now, he thought, methodically packing stuff into boxes, lifting Angusâs papers, checking them, putting unwanted ones in a pile to be burned. Shifting the detritus of a past life. Absorbed in her own misery.

âIâll tell her tonight.â

âIâd appreciate it if you left it until I was gone. Sheâs going to blame me.â

âWhy should she blame you?â

There was a twisted smile at that. âIâm a corrupting influence,â she said dryly. âI make you leave your Blackberry at home when we go to the beach.â

âThatâs a good thing, too,â he said stoutly and then watched

her for a bit more as she went back to sorting papers. âSusie, do you have to do this? I can do it after you leave.â

âAngus would want me to. I should have done it before this. I justâ¦I couldnât bear to.â She hesitated. âWill Marcia be upset, do you think?â

He thought about it. Would Marcia be heartbroken? No. But maybe her pride would be hurt. âI think maybe I should have told her before I told you,â he said ruefully.

âYeah, sheâd hate that. Well, forget you told me. Iâll forget I know.â

âI need you to know,â he said softly, and it was true.

Silence. She bent her head over her sheath of documents. A pile of notepaper, pastel blue.

More silence. Where was he going here? He didnât know.

Five minutes ago heâd been engaged to Marcia. He still could be, he thought, confused. What heâd said didnât have to go out of this room. It wasnât irrevocable.

But it was irrevocable, and the more he thought about it the more irrevocable it seemed. Engaged? He wasnât engaged to Marcia. Engaged meant entwined, linked, connected. He surely wasnât entwined, linked, connected to Marcia.

Tonight heâd watched Kirsty and Jake over the dinner table. Heâd seen their eyes meet as theyâd shared their distress. And that glanceâ¦ It had been nothing, but it had meant everything.

He wanted that sort of communication with the woman he married. He didnât want to share a beach-towel with a laptop.

âGo to bed,â he told Susie, softly because he wasnât sure what his head was doingâwhere his thoughts were taking him. He needed time to think this through.

âThese are personal. I need to sort them.â

âIâll pack them up and send them to you.â

âNo. You pack the clothes.â

âSusie, you need to pack your own gear. The way youâre going you wonât get to bed tonight. Itâs not as if you can sleep on the plane. Rose will be a full-time job.â

âThatâs not your business,â she snapped.

It wasnât. But, hell, he couldnât bear to see this.

âThereâs nothing so personalââ

âThese are letters,â she cut across his protest, fiercely angry. âThese are personal letters.â

âThen maybe we shouldnât read them at all.â

âNo.â Her anger faded a little at that, but the pain seemed to remain. She was kneeling on the floor by Angusâs bedside cabinet, papers spread around her. Still in her shorts and T-shirt, with her hair tangled and wisping round her faceâthe last thing sheâd thought of today had been brushing her hairâshe looked absurdly young. How could this slip of a girl be a mother? Hamish wondered. How could she be a landscape gardener by herself? Susie against the world?

âListen to this,â she said softly, and he paused in his folding of sweaters and let himself watch her face again. She was holding herself rigidly under control, he thought, so rigidly that at any minute it seemed she might crack.

âListen to what?â

âI knowâ¦well, maybe I know that we ought to burn these without reading them,â she whispered. âBut Angus knew he was dying, and he left them. So maybeâ¦maybeâ¦â

âWhat?â

âMaybe he didnât mind us reading them. Maybe he was even proud of them. This is from Deirdre. Way back when she was shopping for the contents of this castle. Weâre talking forty years back.â

âItâs not too personal?â

âYou need to know a bit of back-story,â she told him, ignoring his query. âAngus put a huge amount into this castle, because building it provided an industry for the men of the town in a time of recession. But the locals say he scared himself with how much it cost, and when it came to furnishings he turned into a real scrooge.â

âI canât imagine the Angus Iâve heard about being tight with his money,â he said, and Susieâs face softened in agreement.

âNeither can I. But listen to this. Deirdreâs obviously in the city on a buying spree, writing to Angus back home.â

My love, we have children!

Angus, darling, itâs one of the great sadnesses of our marriage that we havenât been blessed with babies and we canât adopt. Well, Iâve found a replacement. No, sweetheart, I havenât picked up a couple of strays, much as Iâm always hopeful a couple will come our way. But

today Iâve found Eric and Ernst.

Who are Eric and Ernst? I can hear you say it in increasing trepidation. Irish wolfhounds, maybe? Diggers up of vegetable gardens?

No.

Theyâre warriors. They stand eight feet tall in their gauntletedâis that what you call it?âfeet. Theyâre a sort of made-in-Japan imitation suit of armour, real and ready to fight, lifelike right up to the eyes in their visorsâwhite glass eyes with a little black pupil that bobs up and down when you lift the visor up and peer in. I found them in the back of a theatre-prop-cum-junk-shop and theyâre so neglected. Angus, Ernst is missing a leg! Can you believe that? Weâll need to build him a new one. Do you know a leg builder? Theyâre shop soiled and tattered and unloved, and I just looked at them and knew they were destined to stay with us for as long as we live.

Anyway, dearest, kindest Angus, this is to say that weâre coming home on Friday and if you were planning on meeting the train in your car can you think again? I talked to the nice man at the railways today and he says he canât guarantee theyâll be safe in the goods car so Iâve bought two extra tickets. Ernst and Eric can sit in the carriage with me. Isnât that the best thing? Can you imagine it? Oh, my dear, Iâm so excited. I so want you to meet them. You and me and Eric and Ernst, ready to live happily ever after from this moment forth.

There was a long silence.

It was a ridiculous letter.

Hamish thought of Marcia writing such a letter, and couldnât.

He tried to imagine Susie writing such a letterâand could, very, very easily.

Susie and Deirdre. Twin souls?

There were too many twins. His head was spinning.

âWhy couldnât she have children?â he asked at last, trying to sound neutral. âSurely forty years ago adoption was an option?â He was changing the subject here, and he wasnât quite sure what he was changing it from, but he was starting to feel desperate.

âDeirdre was profoundly deaf,â Susie said softly, rereading

the letter with a smile. âI imagine adoption agencies wouldnât see deafness as a desirable attribute in adoptive couples. From what I know of Deirdre, she might have excluded herself on those grounds.â

That floored him. He sat back on his heels and thought of what he knew of Deirdre.

âI thought she was a nurse during the war.â

âShe was.â

âHow could she be a nurse if she was deaf?â

âShe worked in a rehabilitation hospital. I imagine she would have fought tooth and nail to be useful. Lack of hearing wouldnât have stopped her. From what Iâve heard of Deirdre, she refused ever to stand still. Half the older generation of this town knows some sort of sign language as everyone wanted to talk to her. They tell me she was irresistible. Angus loved her so much.â

The twin thing slammed back again. Deirdre and Susie, taking on life no matter what life threw at them.

âHow could they ever have communicated?â

âWithout e-mail?â Susie said dryly. âItâs beyond comprehension, isnât it? But Angus said he woke up one morning in his army hospital; she was standing by his bed and she smiled at himâand he just knew.â

âLove across a crowded room,â he said disparagingly. âRight.â

âOne of the other soldiers had lent him a magazine like *Playboy,*â she continued, ignoring his attempt at sarcasm. âHeâd gone to sleep with Bunny of the Month splayed across his chest. He woke and Deirdre was giggling and he thought, Sod bunnies, this is the one I want.â

Sod bunnies.

Susie was smiling again. When she smiled it was as if the sun came out, Hamish thought, and Angusâs words slammed into his consciousness with the force of a high-voltage charge.

This is the one I want.

âI donât supposeâ¦â he said into the stillness, and then paused.

âYou donât suppose what?â She was back to sorting, her head down, her curls falling forward, intent on the task at hand.

âI donât suppose youâd like to marry me?â

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There was complete and utter silence in the room, and the silence lasted for ever.

What had he said? The words rang round and round in the silence, echoing over and over. He hadnât meant to say them, he thought wildly. They were just suddenlyâthere.

âMarry,â Susie said at last, and she sounded like sheâd been winded. âYouâre asking me to marry you.â

âYes.â He thought about it, wondering what on earth he was saying, but somehow the words still sounded right. His proposal might have been made on the spur of the moment, but that was definitely the gist of what heâd been asking.

âAnd youâre asking me to marry you because?â Susie demanded. She had her breath back now, and was sounding politely bemused. Which was wrong. He didnât want her to sound politely bemused.

âI suspect Iâm in love with you,â he managed, and listened to what heâd said and thought, Yep, that sounds OK, too. He sounded confusedâbut then he was feeling confused. About some things.

Not marriage. He was sure about this.

âYouâre engaged to Marcia.â

âIâm not marrying Marcia.â

âMarcia thinks youâre marrying Marcia.â

âIâve made a mistake,â he said. âJodie told me I was making a mistake and I didnât see it. Itâs only nowââ

âWhoâs Jodie? Another fiancÃ©e?â

âJodieâs with Nick. Heâs a woodcarver.â He thought about the way Jodie had said goodbye to him, the way sheâd dared him to take this holiday and move on.

Jodie would be proud of him.

âSo you moved on to Marcia?â

âJodieâs my secretary.â

âSheâs still in your life?â

âSusie, can we get back to the issue at hand?â

âWhich is that youâd like to marry me.â

âYes.â This was dumb, he thought. He was sitting on one side of the room in a tangle of sweaters and socks. She was sitting on

the far side of Angusâs bed, surrounded by papers. He should be down on one knee on her side of the room. At the very least they should just have had a candlelit dinnerânot the Country Womenâs Association Tuna Surprise.

He thought of the finesse of his proposal to Marcia and the dinner that had preceded it and he almost grinned. But not quite. A survival instinct was kicking in here, telling him that chuckling over clichÃ© engagement settings wasnât quite the thing to do right now.

âWhy do you think you love me?â She still had the conversational tone. Heâd like to move closer but her wordsâ¦they were like a defence, he thought. A bit brittle. A bit too casual.

âSusie, I donât want you going back to the States by yourself.â

âIâm not going by myself. Iâm going with Rosie.â

âYou know what I mean.â

âIâm not sure what youâre suggesting here.â She still hadnât moved and neither had he. It was like some crazy, stilted conversation about something that concerned neither of them. âAre you saying you want me to stay here and youâll stay, tooâor are you saying you want me to come back with you?â

He hadnât thought that far ahead. He tried to make his mind work, but there was something akin to fog blanketing everything. Making it impossible to apply logic.

He was terrified, he thought suddenly. He was just plain terrified. Stepping off into some abyssâ¦

âHey, Hamish, Iâm not going to accept,â she said gently. Thereâs no reason to look like that.â

âLike what?â

âLike Iâm a cliff edge,â she said gently. âI wonât do that to you.â

âYouâre no cliff edge.â But heâd been thinking that. How had she known?

âYou donât really want to marry me.â

âI do.â This seemed important. If he kept saying it then itâd start to make sense, he decided. It must make sense.

âWhat would you do with me?â She almost sounded amused. âBack in Manhattan?â

âYou could work. Thereâs all sorts of landscaping jobs.â

âWindow-boxes to be planted out. That sort of thing.â

âWeâd get a place further out,â he said, starting to sound as dopy as he felt. âI can commuteâor stay in Manhattan during the week and come home at weekends.â

âIn the tiny gaps you have from work.â

âAt least you wouldnât be alone.â

She let her breath out in a long exhalation. She looked at him then, really looked at himâand then she pushed herself to her feet.

âHamish, this is crazy. You havenât thought it out. Forget you said it. Itâs time I went to bed. Iâll get up early and see how much of this I can cope with then.â

She was letting him off the hook, he thought, but he didnât want to be off the hook. Sure, he hadnât thought this through, but the essentials were there. He rose with speed, crossing to stand before her, reaching out to grasp her wrists and hold her at armâs length.

âSusie, it could work,â he said urgently.

âDonât be daft.â

âIâm not daft.â

âIf you didnât feel sorry for me,â she said softly, âwould you be even thinking of marriage?â

âNo, Iââ

âThatâs what I thought,â she said flatly and hauled her arms back.

âNo!â His word exploded across the room, frightening in its intensity. He took her hands in his, urgent. âSusie, itâs not like that.â

âItâs not?â She swallowed, seemingly as confused as he was. Struggling to figure things out. âIf I wasnât limping, would you be thinking you could possibly let Marcia down?â

âI canât marry Marcia. Not feeling as I do about you.â

âBut youâre talking about commuting. In the gaps from work. In the same breath as a proposal. To stop me being lonely.â She took a deep breath and carefully, carefully disengaged her hands. âHamish, when I was single I loved having my own space. I had lots of friends and loneliness didnât come into it.â

âBut youâre lonely now.â

âBecause I met Rory,â she said softly. âWhen he and I were together there wasnât loneliness. How could there be? Sure, there were nights when we were forced to be apart, but our phone bills were enormous and weâd go to sleep talking to each other. Thinking of each other.â

âAs you and Iââ

âShut up and let me finish,â she told him, and her voice was almost kindly. âBecause itâs important. Rory died and I learned what loneliness is. Itâs the awful, awful emptiness when people leave.â

âSusieâ¦â

âIt gets filled,â she said, almost conversationally. âNow Iâm alone Iâve gone back a little to how I was. I depend on me for my company. Itâs taken two years but Iâve learned to cope. But, you know, Kirsty comes to dinner, and then she leaves and the loneliness closes over me again. I fell for Angus and it was good, but when he died, it was bleakness all over again. Emptiness. You know, there are lots of single people who donât like people staying overnight because the house seems so empty when theyâre gone. Loneliness happens again and again and what youâre offeringâ¦ Hamish, every time you walked out the door Iâd be alone.â

âIâd have to work,â he said, startled, but she shook her head, as if she was sad about his incomprehension.

âYes, but when you went to work I wouldnât come with you.â

âWhat theâ?â

âIn your heart,â Susie whispered. As he stared at her in confusion, she smiled. âHamish, you donât understand and maybe if I hadnât had it with Rory then I wouldnât understand either. But Hamish, Iâve fallen in love with you.â

Sheâd fallen in loveâ¦ He reached for her but she took a step back, holding up her hands to ward him off.

âNo.â

âNo?â

âNo,â she said softly. âIf you think that makes a differenceâ¦â

âOf course it makes a difference. Iâve fallen for you, too, Susie.â

âHave you?â she said. âYouâve spent your whole life defending yourself, learning not to let anyone close, and youâre

not about to stop now. Youâre going to spend our entire married life waiting for me to manipulate you. If I was fool enough to marry you. Which Iâm not.â

âI know you wonât manipulate me.â

âNo, you donât. You donât know anything about me.â

âI know youâre the most courageous person Iâve ever met.â

âThatâs pity,â she said flatly. âNot love. If I died tomorrow, would you cry?â

âI donât cry,â he said before he could stop himself, and she stilled.

There was a long, long pause.

âNo, she said at last. âYou donât cry.â

âSusie, Iâm not emotional.â

âWell, there you go, then,â she said softly. âMaybe weâre a match after all, because neither am I.â

âAre you kidding?â

âYou see, thatâs the problem,â she whispered. âWhat you see is on the outside. Youâre thinking you might marry the outside. But insideâ¦you donât have a clue. You just donât have a clue. And now, if youâll excuse me, Iâm going to bed.â She made to push past him but he stepped across the doorway.

âSusie, please, think about it. Itâd be sensible.â

âItâd be committing me to loneliness for the rest of my life,â she whispered. âEven I think I deserve better than that.â

CHAPTER ELEVEN

WAS she mad?

Susie lay and watched the shadows. This was her last night in this castle.

The man she loved had asked her to marry him.

A courageous woman would take him on and train him, she thought desperately into the stillness. Marry him and ask questions later. Have a tantrum or six when he spent fourteen-hour days at the office seven days a week and treated her as being on the outskirts of his life. Which was what would happen. She was under no illusions as to how Hamish saw marriage.

Heâd had some sort of epiphany this week, she thought. Heâd seen Marcia out of her business zone and seen how sterile the life they proposed was.

So heâd gone for the easy solution. The noble one. Ditch the businesslike fiancÃ©e and pick up a ditzy one with a gammy leg and attached child. Give his life a bit of interest and do good along the way.

Problem solved.

She rose and crossed to the window, staring out at the moonlit sky. An owl swooped across the night sky and she thought of Taffy. Taffyâ¦

Sheâd had her for what? A whole day? And sheâd gone, and Susie feltâ¦

Sick.

âThis is it,â she whispered into the dark. She wanted Rose here so she could hug her, so she could tell her baby she was doing the right thing. âI canât expand my heart any more. The heart expands to fit all comers? Maybe, but how often can it break and stay intact?â

She wanted to cry but the tears wouldnât come. Nothing would come. She should sort a few more things. She shouldâ¦

Dammit, if itâs not packed now I donât want it,â she told the moon fiercely, watching the flight of the owl over the waterâs edge. âIâve got no more room. I have no more room for

anything.â

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âMarcia, I canât marry you.â

It was two in the morning. Hamish had been sitting at the kitchen table, waiting for Marcia to come back. Which had taken quite some time. Now sheâd burst in the back door, still laughing, and had stopped dead when sheâd seen Hamish waiting.

He should have broken it gently, he thought as her laughter stopped. Heâd been sitting here for hours, trying to make it right in his head. Nothing made sense any more, but the only absolute that stood out was what heâd just said.

He couldnât marry Marcia. In the end the words had just come.

âWhat? What have they told you?â Marcia demanded, and he blinked.

âPardon?â

âHell, this place! How did they know?â

He blinked againâand then he focussed. She looked rumpled, he thought. There was sand in her hair. A strand of dried seaweed was intertwined with the normally impeccable French knot.

The knot was coming undone. She put a hand up to adjust it, a pin came loose and it tumbled free.

What was going on?

âYouâve been on the sand dunes?â he ventured cautiously, and she swore and shook her hair looser, causing a shower of sand to fall to the floor.

âGod, whoâd live in a small town? People have been staring at me since I hit the town boundaries. I might have known.â She glared across the table at him, defiant. âWhat do you mean, you canât marry me? Youâre not getting prudish on me, are you?â

âPrudish?â

âI was bored, OK? Thereâs nothing to do in this godforsaken place and you were stuck with the widow.â

âSoâ¦â He was putting two and two together and making six. But maybe six was right. âYou andâLachlan?âheaded for the sand dunes.â

âOf course Lachlan. Who else do you think? Hell, Hamish, someone had to be nice to him. You hardly made the effort.â

But she had coloured. His efficient, cool fiancÃ©e was seriously flustered.

âYou were nice to himâ¦as in heading for the sand dunes.â

âIt was just a bit of fun! This is the modern world, you know.â

âI think Iâm old-fashioned.â

âWell, donât be. Hell, Hamish, we lead separate lives. Thatâs the basis of our whole relationship.â

âWhat relationship?â

âWe fit,â she snapped. âYou know we do. Together we can be a serious team. But not if youâre going to get jealous every time I let my hair down.â

âI would have thoughtâ¦maybe youâd want to let your hair down with me?â

âOh, come on, Hamish. Thatâs not what our relationshipâs about. Weâre a *serious team.* Does it matter if we get our fun elsewhere?â

And it was as easy as this. He was being let off a hook he hadnât known he was on until tonight, and suddenly he didnât even recognise what it was that had snagged him.

She didnât love him. He didnât love her. Where on earth had they been headed?

âIâm in love with Susie,â he told her, and she paused in shaking her hair to stare at him in incredulity.

âYou have to be kidding.â

âI donât think I am.â

âWhat on earth do you have in common?â

âI guessâ¦nothing. Are you in love with Lachlan?â

âOf course Iâm not. I donât do love.â

âIncluding with me?â

âWeâre a sensible partnership,â she snapped. âYou know that. Weâve talked about it. You let emotion into your life and itâs down the toilet. If you were on with the widowââ

âIâm not on with anyone.â

âBut you want to be? With her?â Disbelief was warring with incredulity that he could be so stupid.

There was only one answer to that. âYes.â

âSheâll never be a businessmanâs wife.â

âMaybe Iâll be a landscape gardenerâs husband,â he retorted, and she gave a crack of scornful laughter.

âThis is ridiculous. Youâre being ridiculous.â

âYes.â

She paused. Regrouped. âLetâs talk about this. We donât need to break up. I want that title,â she said abruptly, as if it was suddenly the most important factor in the whole deal.

âI think you can buy titles over the Internet if you pay enough,â he said cautiously. âIâll see what I can do. It can be a breaking-off-engagement present.â

âYouâre not serious.â

âIâm serious.â

âIâve come all this way for *nothing?*â It was practically a yell. She was no longer flustered. She was out and out furious.

âIâm sorry.â

âNot half as sorry as youâre going to be,â she snarled.

âYou really think I wouldnât mind a marriage where my wife trots off into the sand dunes with other men?â

âThis has nothing to do with anything I might have done with Lachlan,â she flashed back. âHas it?â

âNo,â he admitted. âIt hasnât. But Iâve decidedâ¦ Marcia, maybe emotion is important in a marriage. Maybe we could both do with some.â

There was a long pause, strained to breaking point.

âRight,â she said at last. âYou want emotion? Letâs see how you deal with emotion, you stupid, two-timing wannabe country hick!â

Sitting in the middle of the table was a vast earthenware casserole containing the congealing leftovers. Marcia removed the lid. She lifted the potâand she threw the entire contents at her fiancÃ©âs head.

With pot attached.

Tuna surprise!

Susie heard Marcia come in. She heard their soft murmurs in the kitchen. Then the voices were raised. Then came a crash of splintering crockery.

Should she get up and investigate?

Mind your own business, she told herself, and shoved her pillow over her head so she couldnât try to eavesdrop.

She didnât want to know.

She didnât.

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Breaking off his engagement had been as easy as that.

Hamish lay in bed and stared at the ceiling and wondered where to take it from here.

His cell phone rang.

It was three in the morning. Was there an emergency back in the office?

âDouglas,â he said crisply into the phone, trying to sound efficient, and there was a sigh down the line that he recognised.

âYouâre not supposed to be working.â

âJodie?â

âYou remember me?â His ex-secretary sounded pleased. âNick said you mightnât answer the phone if you recognised my number. Are you still in Australia?â

âYes,â he said cautiously. âJodie, itâs three in the morning.â

âSince when did you need sleep? Iâve just seen your photograph.â

âMy photograph,â he said blankly.

âOh, Hamish, itâs lovely.â

âArenât you supposed to call me Mr Douglas?â he demanded, and her sigh this time was totally exasperated.

âIâm not your secretary any more. Iâm calling as a friend.â

âWhy?â

âTo tell you I think she looks gorgeous. To say the baby looks really cute and the dogâs amazing and Iâve never seen you look so happy. I opened the magazine and got such a shock that I almost dropped my coffee.â

âWhat magazine?â

She told him and he gaped into the stillness. âHowâ¦?â

âYouâre on the beach,â she told him. âThe babyâs asleep at your feet. Whatâs the dogâs name?â

âBoris,â he said, before he could stop himself. His mind was racing. A photograph on the beach. Albert and Honeyâ¦ It had to be Albert and Honeyâs photograph. This was Susieâs doing. Sheâd told them his real name, theyâd have done some research, and now the photograph would be splashed across America.

Did he mind?

âIs she nice?â Jodie was asking.

âUmâ¦yes.â

âOne of the girls from the office told me Marcia was following you.â

âMarciaâs here. Jodie, what business is it ofâ?â

âYou see, the thing is that Iâm pregnant,â Jodie said, ignoring his interruption. âI thought I was last week and now Iâm sure. Nick and I are so happy. But Iâm so happy that I want everyone else to be. So Iâm worrying about you.â

âYou donât need to worry about me.â

âI wonât if you end up with the lady on the beach.â

âShe wonât have me,â Hamish said before he could stop himself, and there was a breathless pause.

âYouâve fallen in love,â Jodie said at last. âOh, Hamishâ¦â

âShe wonât have me.â It was almost a statement of despair. He was in territory here he didnât recognise.

âYou havenât asked her to live in your grey penthouse?â Jodie said anxiously. âShe doesnât look the sort whoâd live in a penthouse.â

âHell, Jodie, itâs where I live. Itâs where I work.â

âIâve taken a job as part-time secretary in the church that Nickâs restoring,â Jodie said as if she hadnât heard him. âThe payâs lousy. Not a lot of prestige there. Iâm happy as a pig in mud.â

âIâm pleased for you. Butââ

âDonât stuff it, Hamish.â

âMr Douglas!â he roared before he could stop himself, and there was a cautious silenceâand then a giggle.

âYouâve got it bad,â she said on a note of discovery. âOh, Iâm so pleased I phoned. Nick said I was butting in where I wasnât wanted but I so wanted to know, and now I do. Iâll ring you back in a few days and find out the next installment. Donât stuff it. And donât shove your penthouse down her throat.â

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Where was sleep after that? Nowhere. The castle was almost eerie in its stillness. At five Hamish rose and went out into the bushland behind the garden. He walked the trails in the moonlight, calling over and over again.

âTaffy?â

If he could find herâ¦

He wasnât sure what that might mean. He only knew that Susie was holding herself under rigid control and he needed to break through it. Somehow. If he could find Taffy, he could offer to buy a house on the coast, commuter distance from work. He could see Susie there, but the loneliness thing was an issue. Sheâd need a dog.

He could buy her a dog but Taffy would be better.

Taffy was dead.

But there was a tiny part of him that was refusing to accept the pupâs death. It was the logical conclusion and heâd spent his entire life trying to be logical, but heâd just let this tiny chink of inconsistency prevail. Just for now.

âTaffyâ¦â

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He didnât find her. Of course he didnât find her. Logic was the way to approach the world. Logic was always right. Emotionâ¦well, it had no place in his life. Did it?

There was a bruise on the side of his head that said emotion was happening whether he encouraged it or not.

Somehow he had to persuade Susie anyway, but by the time he conceded defeat and returned to the castle, he knew he was too late.

The castle was alive with people. Half Dolphin Bay seemed to be there. Kirsty was presiding over the kitchen, issuing orders. A mountain of luggage was piled in the hallway. Susie was behind a mug of coffee, with half a dozen women sitting around her.

She looked up as Hamish entered. Their eyes metâand he saw a tiny flicker of hope die behind her eyes.

âYou didnât find her.â

She knew what heâd been doing. She wasnât being logical either. She was still hoping.

Someone had to see things as they were. âNo.â He spread his hands, helpless. âSusieâ¦â

âHamish, can you help Jake load gear into the car?â Kirsty asked, sounding as if she was annoyed with him, and he met her gaze and knew he was right. She was seriously displeased. âItâs like a huge jigsaw puzzle. How weâre going to fit everything in, I

donât know.â

âSure.â

âAnd what happened to Mrs Jacobsenâs casserole?â Kirsty asked.

âI took a dislike to it. Tell Mrs Jacobsen Iâll buy her ten more. Susie, can I talk to you?â

But Susie was no longer looking at him. âIâm leaving in half an hour and I have all my friends to say goodbye to,â she whispered. âHamish, we said everything we needed to say last night. Thereâs nowhere else to go.â

âSusie, youâre way over the limit for cabin baggage.â It was Jake, appearing at the door and looking exasperated. âRose canât need all these toys.â

âOneâs Hippo, oneâs Evangeline and oneâs Ted. Theyâre all too precious to be entrusted to the cargo hold.â

âYouâll have to repack,â Jake said, trying to sound stern. âEvangeline weighs two kilos. Two kilos for a toy giraffe! Itâs either Evangeline or the nappies.â

Susie closed her eyes, defeated by choice. Blank.

She should be crying, Hamish thought, feeling desperate. She should be sobbing. But her face was closed and shuttered. Dead.

âPlease, Susieâ¦â he started, and her eyes flew open again.

âLeave me be,â she snapped, anger breaking through the misery. âHamish Douglas, butt out of what doesnât concern you.â

If thereâd been another casserole to hand he could have been hit twice over. And maybe he would have welcomed it.

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He butted out.

Marcia was packing as well. He went out to the courtyard and found her loading her gear into the back of Lachlanâs BMW.

âAs fast as that?â he asked, and she gave him a vicious glare. Lachlan, looking nervous, stayed back.

âYou donât want me here. Iâll be back to you about financial details.â

âFinancial details?â

âThis has cost me,â she muttered, throwing a holdall into the trunk with vicious intensity. âIâve wasted three years of my life

organising our future and you mess it up with one stupid widow. If you think youâll get out of that without a lawsuit, you have another think coming.â

âYou did go to the sand dunes,â he said mildly. He looked across at Lachlan, who decided to comb his hair in the carâs rear-view mirror.

âI hate you,â Marcia told him.

âYou donât do emotion.â

âI so do!â She rallied then, whirling to face him head on, and her eyes were bright with unshed tears. Tears of fury, frustration and bitterness.

âYou see?â she snarled, her voice almost breaking. âI do âdoâ emotion. Itâs just that I donât want to. It stuffs up your life. You canât control people. And I donât want it, any more than I want you.â She flung herself into the passenger seat and slammed the door. Unfortunately the window was open and without the engine on she couldnât close it.

âGet in,â she snapped at Lachlan. âLetâs get moving.â

âSure,â Lachlan said, and grinned at Hamish. âThatâs quite a lady youâre losing.â

âRich, too,â Hamish offered.

âYou think I donât already know that?â

Iâm sure you do, he thought as he watched the BMW disappear from view.

Two unemotional people?

No. There were emotions there all right. Maybe they were in the wrong place but they were still there.

As were his. He just had to figure out where to put them.

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He still hadnât figured it out thirty minutes later as he watched Susie climb into Jakeâs car. Still with no tears. Still with that dreadful wooden face he was starting to knowâand to fear.

âGoodbye, Hamish,â she said, but she didnât kiss him goodbye.

Her body language said it all. He had no choice.

He stood back and let her go.

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The castle emptied, just like that. One minute thereâd been a crowd waving Susie off, a confusion of packing and tears and hugs and waving handkerchiefs as the car disappeared down the road.

Then nothing. The inhabitants of Dolphin Bay simply turned and left, went back to their village, went back to their lives. Which didnât include him.

Hamish went back into the kitchen, expecting a mess, but the Dolphin Bay ladies had been there *en masse* and everything was ordered. Pristine.

There was a note on the table from Kirsty.

> Susieâs organised professional cleaners to go through the place tomorrow. Leave a list of what you want kept. Theyâll dispose of the rest. Mrs Jacobsen says one casserole dish will be fine, thank you, but it had better be a good one.

Great.

He walked back out to the hall where Ernst and Eric were looking morose. Guard duty with nothing to guard.

Theyâd look dumb back in Manhattan, he thought. Could he write a clause into the hotel sale, saying the new owners had to keep these two?

Ridiculous.

The word hung.

Why had Susie thought his proposal ridiculous? It had been a very good offer, he thought. Heâd told her he loved her. Heâd look after her, keep her safe, make sure she wanted for nothing.

Ernst and Eric gazed at him morosely.

Ridiculous.

âThe whole thingâs ridiculous,â he snapped. âNot me. What does she want me to do?â

Whatever it was, he couldnât do it. He couldnât.

His phone buzzed and he looked at the screen. Jodie. Another lecture.

He flicked it off. Out of communication.

That meant the office couldnât communicate either.

Good. He needed to not communicate.

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âYou are sure youâre doing the right thing?â

âOf course I am.â They were outside the vast metal gates at the airportâgates you could only go through as you passed passport control. The days of waving planes off were long gone. Now the gates slammed on you two or three hours before the plane left and that was that.

Susie and Kirsty were in a huddle. Jake was standing back, holding Rose, giving his wife and her sister space to say goodbye.

âBut youâre in love with Hamish.â

âHe doesnât have a clue what love is. Leave it, Kirsty. Itâs over.â

âYou will come back when our babyâs due?â

âI promise.â

âOh, Susie, I donât see how I can bear it.â

âIf I can bear it you can,â Susie said resolutely. Sheâd expected to be a sobbing mess by now, but the tears were nowhere. She didnât feel like tears. She felt dead.

âI can bear it,â she told her sister. âYouâve been the best sister in the world but weâre separate. Twins but separate. You have your life and I have mine.â

Yes, thought Kirsty as she stood and watched the gates slide shut, irrevocably cutting Susie off from return. I have my life. My husband, my kids, my dog, my life. Oh, Susie, I wish you had the same.

Â

What the hell was a man to do?

Hamish paced the castle in indecision. He went back into Angusâs room and looked at the papers scattered over the floor. Yes, they needed to be gone through. There were all sorts of important deeds that couldnât be left. They represented a couple daysâ work.

Heâd stay for two more days, and then heâd leave.

He rang the airline and booked his return flight for two days hence. Right. That was the start of organisational mode.

Now sort the papers.

It didnât happen. His head wasnât in the right space. The papers blurred.

He went back out into the garden and saw his half-finished path. Heâs work on that.

Two spadefuls and he decided his hands were just a wee bit sore to be digging.

Heâd go to the beach. Heâd swim.

Alone?

He had to do something.

He went to the beach.

Â

The water was cool, clear and welcoming. Before, every time heâd dived under the surface of the waves heâd felt an almost out-of-body experience. It had been as if heâd simply turned off. A switch had been flicked. Here he could forget about everything but the feel of the cool water on his skin, the power of his body, the sun glinting on his face as he surfaced to breathe.

Today it didnât work. He couldnât find a rhythm. He felt breathless, almost claustrophobic, as if this place was somehow threatening.

Susie had almost lost her life here, he remembered. And he hadnât been here to help her.

She wouldnât have let him near even if he had been here.

Hell.

He looked back to shore. A sea-eagle was cruising lazily over the headland. As he watched it stilled, did a long, slow loop, focussing on something below, and glided across the rocks just by him.

There was something thereâa dead fish maybeâbut Hamishâs presence distracted the bird. For a moment he thought the bird would plunge down, and suddenly he splashed out and yelled at it.

The bird focussed on him and started circling again. Slowly.

Still watching whatever it was on the rocks.

Itâd be a dead fish, Hamish told himself. Nothing but a dead fish.

He struck out for the rocks, surfacing at every stroke to make sure the bird wasnât coming down. Twelve, fourteen strokes, and he reached the first of the rocks. They were sharp and unwelcoming. Heâd cut his feet trying to get across them.

Itâd be a dead fish.

But the thought wouldnât go away. He looked skyward and the bird was focussed just in front of him. Two or three yards across the rocks.

He hauled himself out of the water. Ouch. Ouch, ouch, ouch.

A dead fishâ¦

It wasnât a dead fish. It was Taffy, curled into a limp and sodden ball, half in and half out of a rock pool.

He thought she was dead. For a long moment he stared down at the sodden mat of fur, at the tail splayed out in the water, half floating. At the little head, just out of the water.

And then she moved. Just a little, as if she was finding the strength to drag herself out of the water an inch at a time.

The rocks were forgotten. His feet were forgotten. He was kneeling over her, lifting her out of the water, unable to believe sheâd still be alive.

âTaffy,â he whispered, and her eyes opened a little. And unbelievably the disreputable tail gave the tiniest hint of a wag.

âTaf.â He held her close, cradling her in his arms, taking in the enormity of what had happened.

What *had* happened?

He looked up and the eagle was still circling. There was another bird now, swooping past, as if the two birds were disputing about who was to get lunch.

Two birdsâ¦

He looked down at Taffy and saw lacerations in her side. Deep slices. Something had picked her upâ¦

And carried her out over the sea? And then maybe got into an argument with another bird, and the prey had been dropped.

If sheâd been dropped into the white water around the rocks then maybe the birds had lost her. Maybe sheâd have been left struggling in the water, to finally drag herself up here.

Only to expose herself again to the birds of prey whoâd dumped her here in the first place.

Hamish was crying. Hell, he was crouched on the rock and blubbing like a baby. Taffy.

âWeâll get you warm,â he told the pup. âWeâll get you to a vet.â

But to walk over the rocks in bare feet was impossible. He

was two hundred yards from the beach.

Heâd have to swim.

He backed into the water, dropped down into the depths and felt Taffyâs alarm as she was immersed again. He was on his back, cradling the pup against his chest. Heâd get back to the beach using a form of backstrokeâbackstroke with no arms? But if the pup struggledâ¦

âTrust me, Taf,â she said softly, and it seemed she did. The little body went limp.

âDonât you dare die on me,â Hamish told her. âI have such plans for us. My God, how can I have been so stupid?â

Â

The doors closed behind her.

It was over. Susie walked past the duty-free shops and the huddles of excited travellers and she didnât see them. Her mind was blank.

âIâm not going to let myself get depressed again,â she told Rosie, hugging her almost fiercely. âIâve been down that road and never again. If Iâd let Hamish have his wayâ¦no, Iâve fought too hard for independence to risk it all over again.â

That was the crux of the matter. Maybe she could change him. Maybe she could teach him what it was to really love.

âOh, but if I failedâ¦â she told Rose. âI have you to think about now, sweetheart, and Iâm just not brave enough to risk everything again.â

Â

The vet was stunned. And beaming.

âTwo deep lacerations on the right side but only scratches on the otherâthe bird couldnât have got a decent grip. But thereâs nothing vital damaged. Weâll run an IV line for twenty-four hours just to be on the safe side but youâve got her warmed and dry. I see no reason why she shouldnât live to a ripe old age.â

Hamish stood and stared at the little dog on the table and felt his knees go weak. Heâd run up the cliff, wanting help, wanting to shout to the world that heâd found her. The castle had been empty.

Heâd opened the oven door, lined the warm interior with towels and laid the pup in there while heâd pulled on some

clothes. Then heâd offered her a little warm milk, and had been stunned when Taffy had hauled herself onto shaky legs, shrugged off her towels and scoffed the lot.

Then heâd thought that maybe heâd done the wrong thing in giving her milkâmaybe sheâd go into shock or somethingâso heâd bundled her off to the vet. To be given the good news.

âSheâs as strong as a little horse,â Mandy, the vet, was saying. âSusie will be so pleased. I can go about sorting out the quarantine requirements again.â

Taffy would leave, Hamish thought blankly. Of course. Taffy was Susieâs dog.

She didnât feel like Susieâs dog. She felt like family.

âCan I take her home?â he asked.

âBack to the castle? Can you keep her still so the IV line stays in place?â

âSure.â

He carried her out into the morning sunshine and shook his head, trying to figure where he was.

Things had shifted. Important things.

What plane was Susie on?

He started doing arithmetic in his head. The new rules for international flights meant you had to be there three hours ahead of departure. Kirsty and Jakeâs car had been overloaded, and theyâd left leeway, expecting delays. If he left nowâ¦

Taffy was in a box in his hands, the IV line hooked to a bag slung over his shoulder. Heâd have to rig it up carefully in the car to get her back to the castle.

He didnât want to go back to the castle.

Heâd have to find someone to care for Taffy.

He didnât want someone else to care for Taffy. At leastâ¦not completely.

âYou havenât found the puppy?â It was Harriet, Dolphin Bayâs postmistress, emerging from the post office and carefully adjusting a sign on the door to read âBack in Five Minutesâ. âOh, my lordâ¦â

âIâm not *my* lord,â he said absently. âIâm Hamish.â

âYouâre my lord to me,â she said, resolute. âEver since I saw you in that kilt.â She peered into the box and her mouth dropped open in shock. âYouâve found her,â she whispered. âOh, my

lord. Where was she?â

âAn eagle had her,â he said, but he was moving forward. âHarriet, see that sign?â

âThe sign?â She turned back to where sheâd written Back in Five Minutes. âYes?â

âCan you make it five hours?â

She looked at him as if he was crazy. âOf course I canât.â

âYes, you can,â he said encouragingly. âIâm your liege lord. You just said it. My wish is your command. Harriet, I command you to change the sign, hop into the front of the car and cuddle Taffy.â

âWhy?â

âYour liege lord needs his fair lady.â

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âFlight 249 to Los Angeles is delayed by sixty minutes. We wish to apologise forâ¦â

âFine,â Susie said to Rose, and glowered at the screen. âLetâs go buy some duty-free perfume. Youâd like that, wouldnât you, sweetheart?â

âNo,â said Rose.

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âWhat do you mean, she canât come in?â

âSorry, mate, dogs are forbidden in airport premises.â Hamish had parked the car in the multi-storey car park and they were now at the airport doors. Hamish was carrying Taffyâs box and Harriet was carrying the IV line.

âYou canât go any further,â the man said, and Harriet sniffed, knowing what was coming.

âHarrietâ¦â

âYouâre going to ask me to sit in the car with Taffy,â she said darkly. âJust when it gets interesting.â

âHarrietâ¦â

âDonât mind me.â She sighed, her bosom heaving with virtuous indignation. âIâm just the peasantry.â Then she grinned. âGo on with you,â she told him. âBut Iâm not staying in the car. Iâll just sit on the doorstep here and watch the comings and goings. Taffy and me will like that.â

âYou canât stay here,â the security officer told her, and she puffed up like an indignant rooster ready to crow.

âThereâs a sign saying I canât come in with dog,â she said. âBut thereâs no sign saying I canât look in with dog. Thatâs just what Iâm doing.â

And she sat on the rack holding the luggage carts in place. She slung the IV bag over her shoulder, she took Taffyâs box into her arms and she smiled.

âWhat are you waiting for?â she demanded. âGo fetch who you need to fetch.â

Â

Her flight had been delayed. Oh, thank God, there was sixty minutesâ grace. But even then it wasnât easy. There was the little matter of the metal doors at passport control.

âYou canât come through,â he was told. âNot unless youâre a traveller.â

âIâm a traveller.â He hauled his passport from his wallet and displayed it. âIâm from the US.â

âYou need to be booked on a plane today. You need seat allocation before you can get through.â

They were adamant.

âWe can get a message to whoever you want to see,â he was told. âBut if they come out theyâll have to go through security again. No one will be happy.â

Maybe she wouldnât come out, he thought. Maybe a message wouldnât work.

He took his wallet over to American Airlines. âI have a ticket two days from now,â he told them. âAny chance of swapping it for today?â

âThe flightâs fully booked,â he was told. The girl behind the counter eyed him dubiously, and he thought that even if he had been booked there might be trouble. Heâd dragged on jeans, a windcheater and trainers but he hadnât shaved that morning and heâd come straight from the beach.

And he knew he looked desperate.

Hell.

The gates stayed shut. Sheâd be through there, sitting, miserable, maybe cryingâ¦

He stared at the screen. There was Susieâs flight, leaving in forty-five minutes. Any minute now theyâd start boarding.

The flight straight after that was to New Zealand.

Susieâs flight was from Gate 10.

The New Zealand flight was from Gate 11.

Act cool, he told himself, trying frantically to be sensible. If you launch yourself at the counter and act desperate, theyâll drag you off as a security risk.

So he sped into the washroom, washed his face, bought a comb and a razor from the dispenser and spent precious minutes transforming himself from a beach bum with hair full of sand to someone who might board an international flight with business in mind. Casual but cool.

He stared at himself in the mirror. What was missing?

Ha! Five more precious minutes were spent buying a briefcase and a couple of books to bulk it up.

Then a walk briskly to the Air New Zealand counter, feeling sick with tension and with the effort not to show it. âAny chance of getting onto the flight this afternoon? I only have hand luggage. Iâm booked for a US flight in two days but Iâve finished what I need to do here and could usefully see some of my people in Auckland.â

His authoritative tone worked. The girl looked him up and downâand smiled. âDo you have a visa?â

He did. The work he did required travel at a momentâs notice and he always had documentation.

âThereâs only economy available,â she said, and he almost grinned. What value a comb?

âThank you.â

Which way was New Zealand?

Â

Why would she want to buy perfume?

âLetâs have a look at duty-free cigarettes.â

âYou donât smoke,â she told herself.

âI might. If I get desperate enough.â

âAre you all right, madam?â an assistant asked, and she blushed.

âUmâ¦yes. Just telling my daughter about the evils of

smoking.â

Â

Hell, why was security taking so long? The line stretched forever.

âPassengers for Air New Zealand, please come through the priority line.â

Thank God for that. But when he was throughâ¦

âTheyâre boarding already. If youâd like to board the cart weâll get you straight to the boarding gate.â

Fine. But he was jumping off early.

Â

She wasnât in the departure lounge.

Where was she?

âThis is the final boarding call for Flight 723 to Aucklandâ¦â

Where was she?

âPardon me, sir, your flight is ready for boarding. You need to come this way.â

âNot until I find who Iâm looking for!â

Â

There was a commotion down near her boarding gate. Shouting. Beefy security men, running.

Then a couple of burly giants escorting someone back toward the entrance area.

Susie glanced up from her rows of Havana cigarsâ¦

Hamish.

âExcuse me,â she said faintly, stepping out into their path. âWhere are you taking him?â

âSecurity,â one of the guards said brusquely. âStep aside, maâam.â

She was holding a box of Havana cigars in one hand, Rose in the other. She dropped the cigars.

With huge difficulty she managed to hold on to Rose.

âYou canât take him away,â she said faintly. âHeâs mine.â

CHAPTER TWELVE

âSo YOU see, you need to come home.â

They werenât going anywhere right now. The chief of airport security had raised his eyebrows, shrugged and shown Hamish, Susie and Rose into his office, closing the door on three trouble-makers.

âTake her baggage off the plane,â he growled to his staff as he left them to it. âAmerican Airlines is already boarding. Sheâs officially missed the plane and if she objects Iâll have them booked for nuisance. Or something.â

But there was no way sheâd object. The security head was smiling as he closed the office door behind themâand he just happened to nudge a wastepaper bin full of crumpled paper in Roseâs direction. He had kids himself and he knew what was needed here was a bit of distraction so the adults of the party could sort themselves out.

Rose obliged. She immediately started emptying the trash, paper by paper, perusing the security memos of the day with all seriousness, then ripping them into tatters, more thoroughly than any shredder.

Hamish wasnât reading anything. He was holding every part of Susie he could reach.

âBut I still donât understand,â she whispered when she could finally find room to speak. Sheâd just been very thoroughly kissed. She was snuggled against him and he smelt of the sea. He tasted of the sea. Her Hamish. âJust because you found Taffyâ¦â

âI cried when I found Taffy,â he told her. âIt felt right. And then the thought of sending Taffy to you in America felt wrong.â

âSo youâre sayingâ¦?â

âI want to marry you. I want to marry you more than anything else in the world.â Then he hesitated. âNo. That needs improvement. I already asked you to marry me and you very rightly threw it back in my face. But itâs different this time. Itâs more than just the love thing. Susie, I want us to be a family

more than anything else in the world.

âWhich means?â

âReorganising,â he said bluntly. âNot taking you back to my life. Not being part of your life. Making a new life for all of us where all the pieces fit in a new whole. Where all of us are a part of it.â

âJust because of Taffy,â she whispered, awed.

âJust because of you,â he told her. âWhen I found Taffy, I thought how fantastic it was that Iâd found her, and then I thought that Iâd found our dog but Iâd lost the most important person in the world. Here I was, crying about a pup when my life was gone. And I suddenly realised why you criedâand why you stopped crying. You must love me. You must. Please, Susieâ¦â

âOf course I love you,â she said, and tried to smile. âHow could I not love those knees?â

âA woman with taste.â

She silenced him with a kiss, and the kiss lasted deeply and satisfactorily through the shredding of at least ten more security memos.

It was a kiss where all questions were answered. Where there was no need for words.

It was a kiss where two people found their home.

âThe first time I asked you to marry me I was dumb,â Hamish whispered at last, when he could finally find the space to get the words out. She was cradled on his knees and he was holding her as if heâd never let her go. âBut, Susie, I swear this is different.â

âI know itâs different,â she said scornfully. âYou think *Iâm* dumb?â

âIâd never think youâre dumb.â

âYou donât mind that Iâve been married before?â

He answered that with another kiss. âYou donât mind that I almost married Marcia?â

âNo, but this is different, too,â she said, trying to be serious. âMarcia and youâ¦you werenât really engaged. But I did love Rory. I never thought I could love again, but his love, this loveâ¦itâs justâ¦â

âThis is a love for who you are now,â he said, hugging her tight while the world steadied on its axis. âAre you worried that Iâll be jealous of Rory? That Iâll make you put away his

photographs? Hell, Susie, Roryâs part of my family and I need all the family I can get.â

âNo, butââ

âRory is part of who you are,â he told her, refusing to be interrupted. âHe loved you and he cared for you and how can I ever be anything but grateful that he found you out in the wide world and brought you into the Douglas clan?â

âAs Angus brought Deirdre,â she whispered. âAnd all of usâ¦somehow weâre all together. She wriggled on his knee, feeling suddenly like bouncing. The shock was wearing off and what was left was a searing blast of joy so great it almost overwhelmed her. âOh, Hamish. Do you think weâll live happily ever after with Ernst and Eric?â

âThey expect nothing less.â

âIn our castle?â

âSure, in our castle. With our pumpkins.â

âAs in all good fairy-tales.â Her thinking was extending, past the confines of the man she loved to the world outside. âWhereâs Taffy now?â

âOut in the trolley racks.â

âWhere?â

âWith Harriet. Come and see.â

Â

And when they finally found Taffy she wasnât alone. The trolley racks were loaded.

Kirsty and Jake had shown the girls round the airport and had finally emerged to find the postmistressâand dogâin residence. So theyâd settled down to wait, tooâhoping that Hamish hadnât talked himself onto Susieâs flightâand when Susie and Hamish and Rose emerged from the airport, it seemed half Dolphin Bay was waiting for them.

âSo youâve come back to us,â Jake said, but he wasnât talking to the woman heâd said farewell to a couple of hours ago. He was talking to Hamish, gripping him on the shoulder as a man gripped a friend he hadnât seen for years.

âI guess I have,â Hamish said, thinking of the impossibility of futures broking from Dolphin Bay, and then shrugging and thinking that impossibilities were made to be overcome.

âI guess I have.â

Â

E-mail From: Hamish Douglas
To: Jodie Carmody
Subject: Suggestion

Dear Jodie

Susie and I are delighted to hear you and Nick will be at our wedding next month, here in Dolphin Bay. With your pregnancy and your job as church secretary, we thought youâd be deeply embedded in your choir stalls.

But your letter, saying the stalls are finished and you and Nick are after adventure before the arrival of your little one, set us thinking. Maybe youâd like to share our adventure?

As you egged me on to discover, my life has changed. We have a castle, we have a little girl, we have a dog and we have a pumpkin patch. I have my financial training, Susie has her landscape gardening and weâve been looking for ways of putting them together.

I can do some sharebroking from here, easily, with only the occasional trip to New York. But I need a secretary.

Susie can garden here to her heartâs content, but she needs people to enjoy her garden and eat her vegetables.

The castle is aging and maintenance is screaming to be done. The conservatory alone needs someone to care for itâsomeone who loves wood.

The castle needs people.

So weâve decided to open our Castle By The Sea. It will be styled as a Cottage By The Sea, which is a famous holiday camp for children in need. Disadvantaged kids will come to us for the holiday of a lifetime. Theyâll come in times of family crisis, theyâll spend two weeks here, on the beach, learning to garden, learning to farm in the experimental farm Susieâs planning. Theyâll take time out from whatever crisis is in their lives.

Weâve talked to the authorities. We have enthusiasm!

But we need someone with experience with disadvantaged kids. Theyâll come with their carers, but weâd plan their experience. Andâyou see, Jodie, I do pay attentionâI remember you telling me that Nick is a social worker. That he worked with disadvantaged kids and he loved it. We wondered whether heâd like to dip his toe in the water again.

Jodie, weâre not offering Nick a full-time job as a social worker or a woodworker, or you a full-time job as a secretary. Susie and I donât intend to be full-time gardeners or sharebrokers either. But we are offering full-time commitment.

What weâd like is for you guys to have a house in the castle groundsâmaybe helping build it could be Nickâs first jobâand for you both to be Share-Castlers. Like share farmers, only different. This castle needs two families. Weâre inviting you to be our partners.

You donât need to answer at once. Terms need to be negotiated. Thereâs no way Iâll let you do this as a temp. What about it, Jodie? Will you share our happy ever after?

Think about it and let us know. With love from:

Hamish and Susie and Rose and Taffy and Ernst and Eric

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Text Message from Jodie Carmody to Hamish Douglas

Weâre on our way. P.S. Who are Ernst and Eric?

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Heart to Heart[**]

Castle at Dolphin Bay[***]